

Chapter 1 – The Unexpected Visitor

It wasn't even a week back before the problems started.

Of course, problems with Vernon Dursley usually were settled via physical punishment of some sort. Harry dealt with that kind of thing every year at Hogwarts. He didn't need additional doses of it at 'home.'

It wasn't entirely Harry's fault, though. He had been having some truly bizarre dreams that week. More like nightmares than anything, though not like any he had ever had before. These dreams seemed... real, almost. Harry was beginning to worry, since normally his dreams tended to be fairly disjointed anymore. As far as nightmares went, the ones he used to have were always the same. The ones he was having now were different - they seemed to be one long, continuous story of sorts. Wanting to err on the side of caution, Harry had written to Dumbledore, informing him of these dreams. The headmaster had written back and told Harry, in a strange bout of honesty, that he had been hearing odd news from all across Europe that summer. It did little to quell Harry's worries.

Now if these nightmares were normal, if nightmares could be called such, there wouldn't be a problem. Harry had learned not to cry out when waking from a bad dream at an early age. But these were different. In fact, it was because of this difference that had driven him to write to Dumbledore. Every single time one of these nightmares invaded his slumber, he had awakened with his scar on fire, burning savagely. This was also accompanied by some form of pained scream. The scream, in turn, summoned Vernon to his bedroom as though it were the dinner bell leading him home.

Harry had long promised himself not to take any more crap from his so-called family. Unfortunately, the nightmares were leaving him feeling weak and vulnerable. This is how Harry Potter, famous since long before he could remember, ended up with a few new scars. Harry knew he wouldn't be able to fight back using magic, and he was too scrawny to even think about going up against his uncle, who moved disturbingly fast for someone so insanely *large*.

Adding to Harry's frustrations was the lack of communications with his friends. Though Andromeda Tonks had mentioned having a foolproof plan to break him out, he had heard nothing. It wasn't until his birthday that his general mood lightened. Thanks, in surprising part, to the gift he had received from Hagrid. Harry had never liked the large man much, feeling that it was partially his fault that he had ended up where he was. But this grudge, for good or not, was slowly ebbing away. It helped that Harry now had someone to talk to.

He had awakened (thankfully before another odd nightmare began) to the sound of numerous owls pecking at his window. It was just after midnight, which he smiled at. Birthday owls always did know how to wake a person. After letting the owls in, taking their packages and allowing them to rest awhile, Harry began opening things. The typical fare from everyone, really. He was happy to see a small box of Sugar Quills included in the package of sweets from the Weasleys, though. He could hide those under the loose board in the floor.

Hagrid's package had air holes.

It took Harry awhile before he had decided to open it. He had turned his light on prior, though, just in case. The box wasn't very large, so whatever was inside was bound to get out and hide somewhere. That or it would just leapt out and eat Harry's face off. Knowing Hagrid, it wouldn't be surprising.

But instead of doom and blood, Harry discovered a somewhat irritated, coiled up snake inside, along with a few dead rats (which Harry smiled darkly at) and a short letter. It had read, *'Dear Harry - Friend of mine picked this up. Found it on his travels, he said. Well, I took one look at it and immediately thought of you, of course. I still remember what you asked of me not long ago. And, seeing as how you 'helped me out of a bind' of sorts, I figured it was the least I could do to thank you. Not sure what his name is... or even if it's a 'he,' but I'm sure you'll be able to work that out. Be careful, though - he's a bit poisonous.'*

The snake was a deep blue color - so deep that it could be mistaken as black in the wrong light. Its eyes were also blue, though very pale. Harry, having done a good bit of research on snakes in hopes of

working out more of his Parselmouth ability, knew that seeing snakes that color weren't exactly common. Especially around his neck of the woods.

"*The letter says you're a bit poisonous.*" Harry said, peering into the box. "*You alright?*"

The snake stared up at Harry for a moment before hissing out a reply. "You can speak to me? That is... very odd. In any case, I am fine, yes. A bit shaken up. That foul beast that carried me seemed to be frightened of me. As for poison... I should say so."

"*What type of snake are you, exactly?*" Asked Harry.

"Type? Though I'm not one to keep track of such things, I did overhear two men, one of whom was very large, mention the words 'Inland Taipan' and 'Fierce' in regards to me. If that rings any bells." Hissed the snake.

Well, it wasn't doom and blood, but it might as well have been. Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose. Leave it to Hagrid to somehow find him a blue variant of the world's most venomous snake. But that didn't make much sense, now that Harry thought about it. He gave the snake a closer look, frowning. "...*You're too small to be an Inland Taipan.*"

"Am I?" Replied the snake.

"*Wrong color, too.*" Harry noted.

"I would chance a guess that perhaps that is why the men were interested in me. Though I do take offense to being called 'miniature.'" Said the snake.

"*Runt of the litter?*" Harry offered. The snake hissed something akin to a swear up at him, causing him to smirk. "*Sorry. Do you have a name?*"

"I've had little need for one." Hissed the taipan. "Perhaps you could think up one for me?"

"I can try." Harry said. *"Fair warning, though - I'm awful with names. Give me a day, I'll work something out."*

"As you wish, then." Said the snake. "And what of you? Have you a name?"

"Huh? Oh! Yeah, sorry. My name's Harry. Harry Potter." Said Harry.

"Very well. It is nice to meet you, Harry. Tell me now, why is it you can communicate in my language?"

Harry was then more or less forced into recounting the events of his second year in great detail to the little snake, who had decided to doze off one of the rats in his box as he listened. Once Harry had finished, the snake eventually said, "I do not believe... that I would like to meet a snake as large as that."

"I don't think I did either, but it couldn't be helped. Now then... what am I going to do with you?" Harry wondered aloud.

"What do you mean?" Asked the snake.

"Well... my family, if you could call them that, aren't the nicest of people in the world. Downright awful, if you want the truth. They'd not think twice about killing you. I think telling them how venomous you are might help ruin that plan, though. Still, I think you should be on me as much as possible. You're small enough - no offense, that you could easily curl up around my arm or something. My body heat would help keep you warm, and I'm sure the Dursleys wouldn't get near you then. The only reason my uncle comes in contact with me is to hit me... and I've just about had enough of that, thank you." Harry said.

"As anyone would. Why do they hit you? Because you are a wizard?"

"Pretty much. They detest magic. Hell, they detest anything that doesn't fit their definition of normal." Harry said. *"Well, it's late, and the owls delivering my presents kinda interrupted my sleep. I need to hide the evidence, then I can get back to sleep. I can hide the remaining rat in my desk drawer, so if you get hungry again, let me*

know. I'll try and sneak more up here. Aunt Petunia's garden usually hides at least a couple small mice."

"I believe I won't need to eat again for awhile. Where will I be staying tonight?" Asked the snake.

"Well, you can curl up around my arm or rest on my chest or something. Wherever you'd feel most comfortable, really." Harry said, getting up and beginning his yearly ritual of disposing of anything that might inform the Dursleys that he had gotten gifts. After he was done, he hid the snake's box after allowing it to spiral its way up his arm. As Harry moved the box under his bed, he felt the snake curl around his neck.

"Careful - I need to be able to breathe." Harry said.

The grip loosened slightly. "Apologies. This is a rather new experience."

"Indeed. I don't think my neck's a good place for you while I sleep. I might roll over or something and crush you by accident." Harry said. He went over to the window to get a look at his reflection best he could. *"...I look like the worst punk rocker ever. You look like some kind of weird collar."*

"What is a punk rocker?" Asked the snake.

"Nevermind. It'd take too long to explain. Anyway, around my neck is fine when I'm awake so long as you don't cut off my air." Harry said. *"Like I mentioned, wherever you're most comfortable is fine."*

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The next day had been an interesting experience. Harry had gotten out of bed that morning feeling better rested than he had felt in ages. The snake had been curled up on Harry's chest. Apparently, Harry had slept on his back the entire night. It'd explain the lower back pain. The bed wasn't very comfortable.

"I think I have a name picked out." Harry informed the snake as he changed clothes.

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you downstairs. First thing's first - I get up and begin making breakfast for the Dursleys. That usually gets them up if they aren't already. I'll introduce you there and we can play it by ear from then on." Harry explained, letting the snake once more spiral up his arm. *"Curl up around my neck again, though, if you would. I want to see how long it takes for them to notice."*

"Are they not very bright?" Asked the snake, coiling lazily around the teen's neck.

"To say the least." Said Harry, chuckling quietly as he left his bedroom.

And so, Harry went about his usual morning routine. And, as usual, the delicious smells emanating from the kitchen wafted upstairs and woke the Dursleys up. It was a Saturday, so Vernon wouldn't be going in to work and Dudley wouldn't be going to school. It was the perfect chance to test the waters in regards to his new friend.

Dudley had amazed Harry when the two met again. He had somehow grown even larger while Harry was off fighting Dementors and freeing his godfather. Seeing two chairs at his place at the table was a regular sight anymore. And, since Dudley tended to come in contact more often than his parents, he was the first to really notice Harry's newly acquired accessory.

"What's that thing?" He asked, half-spitting out a mouthful of eggs.

"What thing?" Harry replied, voice monotone.

"That thing around your neck!" Dudley said.

Vernon glanced up from the morning paper. Petunia glanced up from her food. The two exchanged a dark glance.

"Boy," Vernon began, folding the paper and setting it to one side. "I will not have you wearing ridiculous... *JEWELRY* around my house!"

"Isn't jewelry." Harry replied, keeping his attention on his own food.

"It's a collar, dad!" Dudley said, laughing. "I think he wants to be put on a leash."

"He could do with one." Growled Vernon. "Leash him up in his room and hope he strangles himself."

"Not a collar." Harry interjected.

"Then what the ruddy hell *is* it?" Vernon roared, slamming a hand down on the table.

"Boris." Said Harry simply.

"Boris?" Repeated the Dursleys.

"*Boris*?" Repeated the snake.

"Boris." Repeated Harry, finally looking up. "Ouroboros was too long a name to be used in casual conversation. So I shortened it. Boris is the closest thing it sounded like, so there you have it."

The newly-dubbed Boris uncoiled from around Harry's neck to finally get a better look at each of the Dursleys. In response, Petunia let out a shrill shriek. Vernon gaped like a fish for a moment before sharing a strange look with Dudley. Before either could reply, however, Boris shifted, his tongue flicking out a few times before he let out a low hiss.

"The 'smaller' one - and I used the term lightly - reeks." Hissed Boris.

"*Yeah, that's Dudley.*" Harry hissed back. "*He does that.*"

Petunia let out another shriek.

"What did you just do?" Vernon cried out, looking somewhere between being angry and afraid.

"What? Oh, I was talking to him. I can speak with snakes, see. Parselmouth and all. Boris was just commenting on Dudley stinking. I think I agree. Hey, Big D - when's the last time you took a shower?" Harry explained, turning to his cousin and raising his eyebrows as he asked his question.

Dudley looked furious, pushing his chairs back and getting to his feet, looking very much like he was about to throw a punch.

"Wouldn't do that. If you hurt me - *any* of you - then I'll let Boris on you. You have to come in contact with me to hit me, remember. He can be on you, sinking his fangs into your flesh, in a split second. And I should warn you - Boris here's a type of Inland Taipan - which are usually only found in Australia, so I can only guess how he got here. Anyway, they're usually called Fierce Snakes... for good reason. They're probably the most venomous snakes on the planet. A single bite from him's enough to take out a good 200 grown men...Or in your case, Duddiekins, about *ten* men." Harry said, smiling darkly as he stood up.

"Just because I can't hit you people back doesn't mean I'm going to silently let this abuse continue any longer. I found out something very interesting over the course of the year. I'm assuming you lot heard about that escaped murderer that was running around?" Harry continued, glancing around.

"Yes." Vernon said shortly, having finally settled on being angry. "Yes, we did. What about him?"

"He's my godfather." Harry replied simply, his smile turning pleasant. "And he's still on the loose."

"Wh-what...?" Petunia squeaked, eyes wide.

"And I can send word to him at any time. You see, I have a secret way of communicating with my friend from down the way - I don't need to send my owl to her. Which is why Hedwig is staying *with* them again. See, Hedwig is finely tuned to my... well, my you-know what."

He said, knowing full well that that stood for 'magic' in Number Four. "Anyway, if she senses something seriously wrong with me, she'll start having a fit. In which case, a flood of my kind would fall on this house. I don't know what they'd do to you lot, but I can't imagine it'd be nice.

"Having said all that - you treat me better and all will go well from now on. I'm not asking for alot, mind. Just not getting pummelled and

insulted constantly will do. I'll still be doing my chores, but I'd better get some decent meals this summer." Harry said. Then, switching to Parseltongue, he glanced downwards and asked, "*Is there anything you want, Boris?*"

"Just to be fed and to not be trampled upon." Replied the snake in what sounded like a sleepy voice.

Switching back to English again, Harry relayed this message, to which he added, "That about concludes it. Believe me, I hate being here as much as you people hate having me here. With any luck, I'll be escaping early again. Only a few more summers of this insipid routine before I can finally be free of you once and for all. But until then, I expect to be treated less like a doormat and more like an actual human. And if you lot don't want to die, I'd suggest you get used to the new rules. It wouldn't be the first time I've killed."

And with that, Harry grabbed the last rasher of bacon from his plate and left the kitchen, popping it into his mouth. He could only imagine the looks and conversation that would be had in his absence.

"You have killed?" Boris asked.

"*Technically.*" Harry said. "*Remember that basilisk story?*"

"Ah yes... I see." Replied the snake. "You were very forceful."

"*You have to be with them.*" Harry said, making his way up the stairs and into his room. "*Now we wait and see what they decide to do.*"

"Do you really have a secret way of conversing with your friends?"

"*No. But they don't need to know that.*" Harry said, grinning. "*Come on, I need to get some homework done before I'm due to start my housework.*"

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If Boris caused unrest in the Dursley household, it was nothing compared to what happened the very next day. Harry was cooking lunch (happily, since he was now getting a fair share of the food)

when a noise came from the front door. Vernon sent Dudley to go inspect things. Dudley let out a yelp of surprise from the other room, followed by the cry of, "Look at the size of it!"

"*Think he just got a good look at his own arse?*" Harry hissed in a sharp whisper.

"I don't think his neck can swivel that far." Replied Boris from somewhere along Harry's right arm.

Vernon had started to get up to investigate further, but there was no need, for a moment later and the source of Dudley's surprise burst into the kitchen. Harry let out a squawk of surprise seconds before he was nearly pounced to the ground.

"**SIRIUS!**" He exclaimed.

The large, black dog let out a happy bark in reply.

Harry groaned. "What do you think you're *doing*? You could get caught! ...Again!"

"**BOY!**" Roared Vernon, turning on Harry from where he had been. As Dudley re-entered the room, Vernon stomped towards Harry. But Sirius, in full-on Animagus form, whirled about and let out a savage growl, effectively stopping the large man in his tracks.

"I told you not to threaten me." Harry said, smirking down at the dog. "I seem to have a way with animals, don't I?"

"Get that mongrel out of my house!" Vernon said through gritted teeth. "Or else I'll..."

"Or else you'll *WHAT?*" Spat Harry, narrowing his eyes. "Try and beat me up? If Boris didn't pump you full of venom, my godfather would kill you outright!"

"And what makes you think your godfather would be able to *find* us?" Snarled Vernon. "We could take care of you and be out of town before he could possibly arrive!"

"Oi, Sirius. I know you just got here and all, but uh... would you care to show him?" Harry asked, smiling down at the dog, who was still glaring as fiercely as a dog could.

"Why are you calling that dog Sirius?" Petunia asked irritably. "Is your godfather so much of a street rat that he reminds you of a *dog*?"

"Actually, he was looking pretty haggard last time I saw him. Being in prison with demons that want to devour your soul does that. And no, the dog doesn't *remind* me of him. The dog *is* him." Harry said.

"Don't be stupid!" Petunia said.

"Sirius?" Harry said again.

The dog looked back over its shoulder, seemed to grin, and then in an instant was gone, replaced by a man. Vernon backpeddled into the nearest wall. Dudley let out a scream and bolted from the room. Petunia simply fell out of her chair, gaped, and made strange squeaking noises.

"Oh wow, you're looking better." Harry said, eyebrows raised as he took in his godfather's new appearance. The man had managed to get a good shave in and had managed to trim his hair, which was now hanging just above his shoulders. He was in a proper set of wizarding robes and, most interesting to Harry, was holding a wand. When he grinned, Harry also noted that he had gotten his teeth fixed up - they looked as good as new.

Sirius followed Harry's gaze, then chuckled and held up the wand. "This? Got it through Remus earlier this week. Bought me a new one. Won't ever be as good as my original, of course, but there's no bringing that one back." He said. His voice still sounded a bit hoarse, as though he wasn't yet used to using it again. "Now then... why do these idiotic Muggles know about me?"

"Huh? Oh! Yeah, well... I kinda mentioned you to them the other night. Of course they'd remember the name of a famous murderer." Harry said, his tone light. He bit back a grin that Sirius seemed to pick up on.

"That so?" Sirius said, turning from Harry to look at Vernon Dursley. "Well then. I suggest listening to the boy. Damn strong in his own right, you know. You'd have half the wizarding community out for your blood if they found out you even put a *scratch* on him."

"Now see here!" Vernon said, finding his voice again. "This is my house! And if you don't get out of it right *now*..."

"You'll do *what*?" Sirius growled.

"I'll call the police!" Vernon stated, looking smug.

"Oh? Well, then, be my guest." Replied Sirius, looking equally smug, which caught Vernon offguard briefly.

"Very well, I *WILL*!" Vernon cried, stomping out of the room. Petunia quickly got to her feet and rushed after him.

"Sirius! What are you *doing*?" Harry asked. "If you get caught...!"

"I won't get caught." Sirius said, smirking.

"But... Ohhh, wait a minute, I get it. Sirius, you're absolutely brilliant. Have I told you that?" Harry said, chuckling.

"Not yet." Sirius said, patting Harry on the shoulder. "So, how have you been?"

"Better since I got Boris." Harry said. Seeing Sirius' questioning look, Harry poked at his arm lightly and hissed something. A moment later and the little taipan's head poked out from the collar of his shirt. "This is Boris." Harry explained.

"Never seen a blue snake before." Sirius commented, leaning in to get a better look. "And it's damn weird when you talk to it."

"So I've heard." Harry said, wryly. "Hagrid sent him to me. The one thing he's done that I've approved of."

"Don't like him?" Asked Sirius.

"He brought me here." Harry said, darkly. "Even if it was on Dumbledore's orders, he *brought* me here. I can still see that motorcycle and..."

"Motorcycle?" Sirius said, perking up. "I'd all but forgotten about that... I wonder if he still has it?"

"Dunno." Harry said. "Why do you want it?"

"Because it was mine!" Sirius said. "Hagrid and I crossed paths the night Voldemort made his raid on Godric's Hollow. I was chasing after Wormtail and he needed a quick way to get you out of there. Since Wormtail isn't faster than I am when I'm running as a dog, I let Hagrid borrow my bike..."

"And then Pettigrew set you up." Harry finished, frowning. "Well, it couldn't hurt to check with him and ask."

"Yeah. Not that I could go tearing about on it right now, mind. I'll need to haul that damned rat in first." Sirius said. "...And speaking of being turned in, I'm going to be if I don't get down to business."

Sirius had just transformed back into dog form when Vernon stormed back into the room, leading an officer forcefully and saying, "He's in here! That murderer Sillipuss Black is in here!"

"I only see the boy, sir." Said the officer, jerking his arm away from Vernon and sending the man a baleful look. "Do you know you can get in serious trouble for pranking the police?"

"Prank!" Vernon spluttered. "He's ***RIGHT THERE!***" And with great flourish, Vernon pointed at the large, black dog that was laying down beside Harry's feet.

"...Sir, are you on medication?" Asked the officer, cocking an eyebrow.

"He can change into a dog!" Vernon yelled, flailing his arms wildly.

"Of course he can. Sir, if you could just follow me back out to my car, I've got a few things I'm going to need you to sign." Said the officer,

this time grabbing Vernon's arm and leading *him*. Vernon yelled all the way outside.

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The next few days were rather enjoyable for Harry. In fact, they were, without a doubt, the best days he had spent with his relatives. Sirius had stayed around, sticking primarily in dog form unless he felt the Dursleys were getting too far out of line for his liking.

The police had given Vernon a stiff fine for his 'prank' on them. This, of course, hadn't set well with the man, who had stomped back into the house to scream at Harry. This caused Sirius to change back and promptly spell Vernon's mouth away. Naturally, the rest of the Dursleys scrambled away from him, locking themselves in the master bedroom for the rest of the night. Only after Vernon had promised to behave did Sirius remove the hex.

And then, out of the blue, he was gone. Sirius wasn't next to Harry's bed, curled up between it and the door. Instead, there was a note in his place. Scowling, Harry picked it up and read it.

"Harry, sorry to leave so suddenly. Dumbledore got in touch with me sometime around 2, said he needed to speak with me. Don't worry - I'll be going via his phoenix, apparently. Not sure how that's going to work, but there you go. Dunno if I'll manage to get back in touch before you return to school or not, though. If I can't, I'll make sure to write so that you don't worry yourself to death. That being said, if that blubbery whale of a man gives you any crap, send me a message. I'll make sure he remembers who he's dealing with. See you when I see you -- Sirius."

"Well, great." Harry muttered, running a hand back through his hair. "Guess it was too much to hope for that he could be here the entire summer." And then, slipping into Parseltongue, he continued, *"Wonder what Tonks is up to. Shame they didn't come by when Sirius was here. Andromeda probably would've gotten a kick out of it."*

"Tonks?" Asked Boris.

"Friend of mine. Really pretty. Smart, too, though she's got a bit of a mouth on her." Harry said, chuckling quietly.

"I see." Replied the snake slowly.

"She and her mother are supposed to be breaking me out of here at some point. Wish they'd at least tell me how." Harry said, making a face.

"Now that we are alone again, what is our course of action?"

"Survive." Harry replied simply, shrugging. *"I trust Tonks and her mum. They'll get me out of here. I just have to be patient."*

"Not one of your strong suits, I take it."

"Unfortunately." Harry said. *"What good is an impatient Ravenclaw?"*

"Ravenclaw?"

Harry opened his mouth, then shook his head. *"I'll tell you later. I think it'd be easier to just show you once we're back at Hogwarts. For now, though... I suppose I should go and start breakfast. If Tonks is going to surprise me with the breakout attempt, I have the feeling I'll need some energy. For running, if nothing else."*

"You live a very...odd life." Commented Boris.

"You have no idea." Harry said. And, after getting dressed, he made his way out of his room and back downstairs. Another day, same old routine. With any luck, the Dursleys would remain paranoid, thinking that Sirius might randomly appear if they harassed Harry anymore. And if they didn't... well... Harry would take off on his own. He could get over to Number Nine quick enough.

In fact... depending on how the day went, he might just go pay his friend a visit, anyway.

That thought alone kept Harry happy and smiling throughout the whole of breakfast.

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Author's Notes: Well, true believers, we're back again. Another book started. And now that Harry is of reasonable age, I can finally start molding him in the direction I want him to go in. I've not gotten close to mapping out any of the Triwizard Tasks yet - and oh yes, they WILL happen - but I've got a few amusing ideas. And here we have your basic starter. I realize Harry getting a snake is fairly overused, but I have good reason for sticking Boris in there. And not just to help Harry master his Parselmouth skills.

I'm sure a few will balk at Sirius' appearance. But the way I see it, how would anyone KNOW, really? He's parading around as a big ol' dog mosta the time and left via Fawkes. Hadta get him back outta there somehow, y'know. And no one can point out Sirius using a spell inside the wards would alert someone. Dumbledore clearly already knew, anyway. Dumbledore knows everything. He's not very smart with the KNOWLEDGE, but he knows everything, anyway.

I'm not ENTIRELY sure how I'm going to fill out the next chapter. The summary is long enough, but long doesn't always equal stuffing. If nothing else, you'll get a healthy dose of fluff earlier on. And you'd better well enjoy it while it's there. Mwahaha. In any case, our ickle kids have finally started to change a bit, and that'll all get talked about next chapter.

I hope everyone will enjoy where I'm taking things. I've had a lot of ideas since I started, but most were only possible in or after Goblet. I'm going to keep on a 1 to 2 week per chapter update schedule, so as not to burn myself out. I don't think that's too long to wait. And, as usual, I'll probably hit bursts of time where I'll crank out multiple chapters like I did at the end of Prisoner.

Post-edit comments: The next update will probably come towards the end of the month. I hate doing that, but a number of things are going on. My sleep schedule's all screwed up again, for once, and I just can't write easily when it isn't after midnight. Also, I've got a ton of new videogames (blame income tax returns) that I wanna play. And for those wondering, I'll be (trying, at least) to finish fixing

*Philosopher's Stone between now and the posting of chapter 2 here.
Until next time, I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of book 4!*

Chapter 2 – Changes

"I'm going to personally kick Dumbledore so hard in the bits that he'll age ten years!" Harry cried out furiously, running in a full-out dash. Behind him, Dudley's gang were on his heels. Not so much Dudley himself, who was so large that running was more or less out of the question nowadays. But he had sent the thinner and bulkier members of his gang ahead. Apparently, he had failed to mention that Harry was toting around a rather venomous snake.

Nonetheless, Harry wasn't in the mood to get pummelled. It had been a nice enough day - he had been out for a walk to keep his irritability down and then, from around a corner, he had run into Dudley and his boys.

Of course, Harry had a way to lose the gang - he was heading for it now, in fact. But that was hardly the point. One of those idiots behind him had apparently picked up a broken bottle from somewhere. It wouldn't honestly surprise Harry if they had all been drinking before they had run into each other. Harry was well aware of the goings-on Dudley did when he was supposedly over at Piers' house.

Luckily, Harry was quite used to fleeing and had the whole area mentally mapped out. He knew more short cuts and escape routes than anyone his age should rightfully be aware of. And, thankfully enough, Dudley's gang never seemed to remember any of them. He would always jump the hedge near Mrs. Figg's house, which would give him a huge lead - the old woman almost always had a handful of her cats patrolling the area around her house. Dudley's gang had found out the hard way that, Harry aside, they apparently didn't like humans too much.

"*Just a few blocks!*" He huffed out in Parseltongue as he ran for Mrs. Figg's house. Boris had been peacefully sleeping around his forearm when they had been walking. Ever since the chase started, however, Harry had asked him to move up to his neck. Not only was there a better chance of striking Dudley's gang members should they get in too close, there was a better chance of the little taipan making an escape should things get too bad.

"Does this happen often?" Called out the little snake.

"More than I'd care to admit!" Harry hissed in reply. *"Dammit all, I'm tired of showing up in front of Tonks all bloodied or insane! It's not happening this year!"*

His determination driving him harder, Harry finally put a good distance between himself and the gang members. It allowed him to slow down to a walk to catch his breath. He was still a few blocks away from Number Nine, but he could get there in one final burst of energy if he needed to.

"I'll be glad when I get there." Harry panted, leaning over with his hands on his knees. *"I need something to drink..."*

"You're quite fast." Observed Boris.

"I have to be." Harry replied, standing up straight again and stretching. *"It's been like this since I was little. Dudley, back when he was a bit thinner, and Piers used to chase me all over the place. Only back then, I didn't have the option of bolting to a friend's house."*

"I'm going to be going on lots of 'wacky adventures,' aren't I?" Asked the snake in a rather dry tone.

"Probably." Harry said. *"Merlin knows I get into enough of them. Remind me to give you my full backstory sometime. You'll probably flee in the night."*

"Perhaps, perhaps." Said Boris.

"Crap, here they come again." Harry said, sighing as he looked over his shoulder. The gang, a good dozen or so boys of varying body types, had rounded a corner and had spotted him again. *"Hang on, Boris! Not much further!"*

Harry took off running again, aiming to get to the back yard of Number Nine rather than the front. If the Tonks women were out or it took them awhile to answer the door, he'd be in trouble. At least using the back door might give him a bit more cover. It was the first time that Harry would be trying it out - he had always approached from the

front in the past. But then, he had never been chased there by Dudley's goon squad, either.

Harry still had a good block or two on Dudley's gang, so he leapt over the fence at the end of the road Tonks' house was located on. Avoiding a small, yappy-type dog as he cut through, he continued fence-hopping until he reached Number Nine's back yard, where he was stopped dead in his tracks as he looked up from his landing.

Harry gaped. Of all the random things to see when he popped in for a surprise visit, (if you could call it that) he hadn't expected to see Tonks out sunbathing. She had on a very blue bikini (to match her equally-blue hair) and a pair of large, silly-looking sunglasses.

"Harry!" Said the girl, staring at him. "The hell are you doing here?"

"Bluh...? Oh! Right! Tonks, we need to get inside! I've got a dozen angry idiots chasing me!" Harry said, his motor functions recovering from seeing Tonks in a bikini. "They're *right* behind me, too!"

"What? Dammit, Harry!" Tonks said, quickly getting to her feet and rushing towards the door. "You always have to make a flashy entrance, don'tcha?"

"That's me!" Harry said, grinning as he followed her.

Once the two were inside and Tonks had locked the door behind them, Harry slumped to the ground. "Oh man... don't wanna do that again..."

"Want some water?" Asked Tonks, taking off the sunglasses she had on.

"Very much." Harry said, leaning his head back on the door. He cracked an eye open and watched Tonks walk across the room.

"*Nice view.*" Commented Boris.

"***Incredibly.***" Agreed Harry, a tired giggle of sorts escaping him.

"Oi, what are you-- gah!" Tonks said, looking over her shoulder and noticing the snake coiled around Harry's neck. "Um... mind explaining?"

Harry smiled over at Tonks and slowly got back to his feet. "Tonks, meet Boris. *Boris, this is Tonks.*"

Boris uncoiled himself partially, extending his head out a ways so that Tonks could get a better look at him. "*A pleasure, I'm sure. Thank you for saving us.*"

"'Boris'?" Tonks repeated. "...What'd he say?"

"Thanks for saving us. That goes double for me." Harry said, stepping in and kissing the girl on the cheek.

Tonks blushed, pushing a tall glass of water out. "Yes, yes, I'm queen of the safe houses. Lemme go change, will ya? I didn't expect anyone to jump in on me relaxing."

"Aww, do you have to?" Harry said, taking a long drink. "I was enjoying the view..."

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Men..."

"Hey, it was a compliment!" Harry said, grinning. "You really do look good in that."

"Yes, I'm sure I do." Tonks muttered. "...Hey, when the hell did you get so tall?"

"Huh?"

It was true - Harry had apparently picked up a few inches over the last few weeks. He was now almost a head taller than Tonks was. Even taking into account her lack of footwear, he had a good bit of height on her now. Tonks, on the other hand, had changed a fair amount, too. Her face had become more heart-like, amongst other things Harry was trying not to pay attention to.

"Taller and scrawnier." Tonks said, poking Harry in the gut.

"Geh! Hey, stop that! I'm not scrawny!" Harry said, pouting. "I've been eating better this year than I ever have over there. Oh, hey, that reminds me - is your mum around?"

"Nope. She's at work. Why?"

"Sirius decided to spend some time with me at the Dursleys." Harry said.

"**WHAT?**" Tonks cried. "What the hell..."

"I know, that was my reaction. But it was great - he showed up in dog form, transformed in front of the Dursleys, and threatened them. Uncle Vernon called the police, but Sirius was back in dog form by the time they got there. He got fined quite a bit for 'pranking the police.'" Harry said, walking over to the kitchen table and sitting down.

"Ohh, I wish I could've been there for that." Tonks said, sighing wistfully. "...Anyway, I'm going to go change into something more decent."

"Awww..."

"Quiet, you. You've had your eyefull for the day." Tonks said, rolling her eyes as she padded out of the room.

"*The day went from awful to really good in a very short time.*" Harry commented to Boris as he brought the glass of water up to his lips again. He grinned like an idiot, then gulped down the remaining liquid in one go.

"*So it would seem.*" Boris replied, curling back up around Harry's neck. "*I take it she hasn't always looked like that?*"

"*She's... grown a bit... let's just put it that way. I guess both of us had growth spurts over the last month or so. But... yeah, wow...*" Harry said, trailing off.

"*Humans...*" Mumbled the snake.

oOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Tonks had returned wearing jeans and a dark tanktop, pulling her still-blue hair back into a ponytail. From there, the two had moved into the living room and Harry gave the girl a retelling of his summer so far. He knew he would be telling it to Andromeda later that night, but it was still so amusing to him that he didn't mind.

Harry then sat and told Tonks what he'd like to get done at Hogwarts that year. First thing was finding a bigger, better place to call their hideout. The Nest wasn't big to begin with, but they really did need a larger place. Especially since Harry was planning on learning a lot more spells, most of which he had read about and felt ready to start trying out. A place that, should the need arise, could provide them a secondary place to sleep. Somewhere not around the other students.

Once, he caught Tonks looking at him strangely. When he called her out, she just shook her head and explained, "Sorry. You just look so different. It's not just the height you've picked up. Your eyes look different..."

"I haven't been fiddling with my powers much..." Harry said, frowning.

"Not what I meant. They look... well, I dunno how to describe it. They aren't sunken, but..." Tonks trailed off.

"I honestly haven't noticed." Harry said, brow creased.

"And you really do seem scrawnier for some reason. I know you said you were feeding yourself better this summer and all, but still. Maybe I'm just used to you showing up on the verge of death." Tonks said. "...Man, that doesn't sound right."

"We've been through a lot, I guess. I don't think I ever apologized for showing up so often in some kind of danger." Harry said, smirking slightly. "Sorry. I'm not trying to make you worry or anything."

"I worry anyway." Tonks said.

"Yeah. I know." Mumbled Harry, leaning his head back on the couch and closing his eyes.

After that, he had fallen asleep for awhile. It was dark when he woke up next. Tonks was still lounging around next to him, only now she had on some pajamas. He let out a groan as he moved his head, causing the girl to jump slightly.

"Sorry." He said, rolling his head in a slow circle. "Damn. Don't let me sleep like that again. Neck's killing me."

"Sorry. But you looked like you needed it." Tonks said.

"Probably did. *Entirely* not the point." Harry said, stretching. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to nine." Replied Tonks.

"Your mum back yet?"

"Nah. She's having to work late tonight. I told her you'd popped in, but figured it was best to not mention anything about Sirius over the fire." Tonks explained.

"Good thinking. I doubt the Ministry suspects you guys, as his relatives, have anything to do with him. Best to keep it that way." Harry said. "...Got anything to eat? I seem to have missed a meal here."

"You'll have to sustain on the same junk food I do unless you want to cook." Tonks said, grinning. "I've been in a lazy mood all day."

"Please note that I haven't minded that one bit." Harry said, getting to his feet. As he did, his lower back let out an angry **CRACK**, which caused him to hiss.

"Ooh, jeez. That didn't sound good. You okay?" Tonks asked, hopping up as well.

"I could do with a chiropracter, but otherwise, yeah. Just peachy." Harry muttered, rubbing his back. "Look, Tonks... I think I should get back to Number Four. I don't think I have to worry about the Dursleys. I've snuck in after dark in the past. Aunt Petunia is the only one who *might* be awake at this hour."

"Awww, you aren't gonna stay over?" Tonks asked, pouting a little.

"As nice as it would be to stay here, all my stuff's still over there. And I need to make sure none of those idiots *gets* to it." Harry said, slipping his hands in his pockets.

"I guess that's true. You gonna be okay?"

"Good as I ever am." Harry said.

"Oh, don't say that!" Tonks said, swatting Harry on the arm.

"**Oww!** Right, I'll be perfectly fine, Nymmy. Don't worry. If all else fails, I have Boris around. Plus they think Sirius could still be lurking about. And if both of those fail, I'll just start shifting my hair and eye color around in front of them and tell them I can make the effects happen to them if they try any smart stuff." Harry said, heading for the front door with Tonks right behind him.

"Well... alright. Don't worry, though. Mum and I should be ready to spring our surprise on you soon. Sorry we haven't done anything yet. Mum had to go through Dumbledore about this and he's all but insisting you stay there as long as possible. Give us a bit longer, alright?" Tonks said.

"No problem. Like I said, I've been having an easier time there this year, so immediate escape isn't a high priority. It'd be *nice*, of course, but there's nothing life-threatening happening, goon chases aside." Harry chuckled. "...It was good seeing you again, though."

"Yeah..."

"You been alright?" Asked Harry.

"Bored outta my mind, missing you, worried about you, scared you'll show up just one step removed from being a corpse again... y'know, the usual." Tonks said, glancing down.

Harry sighed. "I really wish I could live somewhere else. I know the blood wards keeping Number Four are special and stuff, but... still.

Couldn't we just ward *your* house or something? I wouldn't say no to spending my summers here..."

"Seconded." Tonks said. "...And how do you know the blood wards are all special and strong? What do you actually *know* about them?"

"...Well, nothing, really. But Dumbledore's repeatedly stressed they'll keep me safe. I dunno, in case one of Voldemort's incarnations gathers followers or something." Harry said.

"You might look into researching blood magic this year or somethin'. See if the old man's really tellin' the truth." Tonks said.

"Bitter at him?" Asked Harry, grinning.

"Incredibly." Grumped Tonks. Then, poking Harry in the chest, she said, "You come visit more often!"

"Why don't you visit *me* more often?" Harry asked, still grinning. "You and your mum should come by for a spot o' tea or something. Just out of the blue. The Dursleys won't dare deny you access if your mum's around and has her wand on her."

"Ooh, that sounds like a plan." Tonks said, a gleam in her eye. "I'll wait up for mum and run some ideas by her, see if any work out."

"It's a plan, then." Harry said. "Seeya soon, I hope."

"The sooner the better." Tonks said, nodding. "Have fun sneaking back in!"

"Are you kidding? I'm practically a ninja with all the sneaking I can do. Blame Leon for *that* one." Harry said, laughing as he tugged open the door and stepped out into the cool night. "Seeya!"

"Bye!"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

It seemed like one of the ideas Tonks ran by her mother clicked or something, as the very next day, around noon, the two women

stopped by Number Four. It had started out as an average day. Harry hadn't gotten much sleep the night before for some reason, so he was in a bit of a foul mood. He had learned ages ago to keep his emotions securely locked down while around his relatives. But now that he had Boris, he was feeling a bit more daring. He still made the meals as usual, though he banged the pots and pans around a bit more than normal. When Vernon had yelled at him for it, a dark glare from both Harry and Boris quickly made the man back down.

An hour or so before lunch, Hedwig had pecked at Harry's window. After a brief, and quite odd, confrontation between snake and owl, Harry managed to get the note that Tonks had sent him. Boris seemed to think that Hedwig was going to be his doom, and Hedwig seemed to think that Harry had gotten her a treat. It had taken a good five minutes of rapid moving and talking to get the two animals to see eye to eye.

In her note, which was hastily scrawled, she told Harry to make extra food for lunch - anything was fine - because she and her mother would be stopping in. This immensely lifted Harry's spirits. He wasn't sure if their plan to get him out was going to be a part of this little visit, but the visit itself was sure to be hilarious, so he didn't much care.

A little before noon, Harry went about cooking again. It was a simple meal by his standards, revolving mostly around pasta. He didn't want to make anything particularly large - Vernon had been known to lob steaks at Harry's head in the past. He had briefly considered one of the Dursleys grabbing a handful of spaghetti and slinging it in the faces of the Tonks women, but he knew that Andromeda would hex their fingers off if they tried.

The smell, as it tended to do, rounded up the Dursleys on its own. They took their usual spots at the table, having no idea what was about to happen. The first indication that something was up came with the amount of food Harry was preparing. An extra large salad and far more pasta than usual, which didn't go unnoticed by Petunia.

"What on earth are you doing, boy?" She snapped, glaring at him as he set the salad down on the table and turned to go back to the stove. "How much are you planning on eating!"

"No more than *us*." Vernon snarled quietly. "Or he'll be compensating us."

"Visitors are coming." Harry replied matter-of-factly, stirring the pasta slowly.

"I *beg* your pardon?" Petunia said, turning in her seat to stare at Harry. "And just who do you think will be stopping by?"

"Friend of mine." Harry said.

"And who gave you permission to DO this, exactly?" Growled Vernon.

"Oh, do shut up." Harry said, sighing lazily. "Stuff your fat gob with lettuce if that's all you're going to go on about."

"*WHAT* did you say to me?" Vernon roared, slamming his hands on the table as he got to his feet.

Turning, Harry glared venomously at the man and hissed out, "*I told you to shut your fat mouth, you bloody hippo! Now sit back down or this fork is going to find itself lodged in a place that's going to be **very** embarrassing to explain to the doctors!*"

Of course, the sudden switch to Parseltongue caused the Dursleys to go pale. Vernon was the first to recover, and he was just about to storm around the table at Harry when the doorbell rang. Dudley, who had apparently either forgotten about Harry mentioning that his friend was coming by, (that or he just hadn't been paying attention) was quick to leave the room to answer its call.

Of course, a moment later and the boy let out an appropriately pig-like squeal, charging back into the kitchen and bolting to the far side of it. Moments later, Tonks popped her head in. Spotting Harry, she stepped in properly. Harry goggled at her. In all the time he had been friends with the girl, he had never seen her wear a dress. Hogwarts uniforms clearly didn't count. But there she was, in a pale blue sun dress, complete with matching shoes. Her hair, which of course matched the rest of her outfit, was in a ponytail that still reached the center of her back. Her eyes, a deep blue, seemed to twinkle when she looked to Harry.

"Wotcher! Your cousin seemed scared of me for some reason, so I thought I'd follow him in. How's lunch comin' along?" Tonks asked, walking over to where Harry was standing.

"First off, since when do you own a dress? Second, you look beautiful. Third, is your mum around?" Harry replied, ticking off points on the hand he wasn't holding his stirring fork in.

"To answer in order - I've always had a few, thank you, and yes." Tonks said, smiling.

"**BOY!**" Roared Vernon. "I won't have your... your... *people* in my house!"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up, you bloody hippo?" Harry asked, sighing in a rather tired manner. "...oh, that's right, you couldn't understand me. Well, I told you to shut up, in any case. Tonks, could you go wave your mum in? Lunch'll be ready here in a minute."

"Sure thing!" Tonks said, bouncing back over to the kitchen door and disappearing for a few seconds. When she returned, Andromeda was with her. The older Tonks had on a very smart, black business suit. Her dark hair was pulled up in a rather McGonagall-esque bun, and she had on a pair of square-framed glasses. Harry almost snorted. He had no idea what the woman was planning, but it was bound to be amusing. Even when she went in to work, she didn't dress like that.

Tonks bounced back over to help Harry plate up and serve the remaining food, whispering to him, "I almost busted a gut seeing her like that. You did better than me holding it in."

"Why *is* she dressed like that?" Asked Harry in an equally-quiet voice.

"You'll see." Tonks said, winking.

Andromeda was quick to pull her wand and, in a few flicks, expanded the dinner table and added two chairs to it. The Dursleys all made various noises and groans at the sight of magic being performed in front of them. Harry thought they must have been frightened enough to not yell or anything.

After everyone was seated, Harry finally made the proper introductions. "Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, this is my friend Tonks and her mother, Andromeda."

Petunia made an upturned-nose sniff at their names, while Vernon simply glared down at his plate. Dudley, who had cautiously made his way back to the table, was too busy stuffing his face to really pay any attention.

"I don't know if he's ever told you this," Andromeda began, her voice dry and pitched down a tone. It did wonders to make her seem nonsense. "But I work with the magical version of what amounts to Child Protective Services. In other words, I ensure children are well taken care of in their homes and that there is no abuse taking place."

At this, the elder Dursleys' eyes snapped up, staring at Andromeda for a moment before turning and glaring at Harry, who was eating his pasta extra hard so that he didn't accidentally crack up and ruin the whole thing. This was going to be good.

"Now see here." Vernon said, his voice forcefully calm. "We've done nothing wrong to the boy."

"That's not what I've seen." Said Andromeda, adjusting her glasses. "I've seen his upper body. In fact, just a few years ago, he turned up on our doorstep very near death, he was beaten so badly."

"And you think we have something to do with it?" Snapped Petunia.

"Unless some unknown party met with Harry between your house and mine? And it isn't the first time I've seen him injured. As you may know, he's spent a good deal of time at our house in the past few years. I've seen the number of scars on him. He's done a good job trying to cover up how he's received them, but I assure you that I was able to see through his thinly-veiled lies." Andromeda said.

"We've done everything that man asked us to do!" Petunia said, her voice raising in pitch. "How dare he even drop the boy off with us! After his mother went off and got herself killed--"

"Boris." Harry said, in clear English, raising his head to stare into his aunt's eyes.

The miniature inland taipan slithered out from one of Harry's sleeves, raising its head to look up at Petunia.

Petunia shrieked, shoving herself away from the table faster than Harry thought was possible. Dudley fell over backwards in his chair. Vernon got to his feet as well, though in a far more civilized manner than his wife. The snake slowly crossed the table, letting out a low hiss.

"Call that thing off, boy!" Roared the man, turning purple.

"I told you to shut up!" Harry roared back, finally getting to his feet as well. "Or do you want to die too?"

"Harry." Andromeda said, placing a hand on his arm.

"No. They aren't going to talk about my mother like that." Harry growled. "They have no right to talk about her!"

"I know that, dear. But calm down. We're getting you out of here. Don't you worry." Andromeda said, her voice back to its usual tones. "Looks like my plan didn't work out as smoothly as I had hoped."

"It isn't your fault these people are heartless." Harry murmured. With a nod, Boris had turned and slithered back up Harry's arm. "You know, Aunt Petunia. For as much as you call *me* a freak and inhuman... you sure don't act like one yourself. Being glad your only sister is dead? That's disgusting."

"Don't you speak to me like that!" Petunia shrieked, pointing a bony finger at Harry.

"I'll speak to you however I bloody feel, you insensitive cow!" Harry spat.

Vernon was about to say something, his face now a bright red, when Harry turned on him. "And if you start one more time, I'll let Boris

loose and won't call him back! Be glad I'm not willing to be expelled. Otherwise, all three of you would have died a long, long time ago."

Harry then turned and stormed out of the kitchen, hissing quietly to Boris as he did.

"That went well." Said the snake.

"Shut up."

"Now now. No need to be snarky with me."

"Yes, well, being snarky's about the only thing I can do at this point." Harry growled. *"I can't very well rip off their mouths or anything, now can I?"*

"As much as your cousin and uncle could do with such an operation, I don't think your Ministry would be very happy, no." Replied Boris.

*"Exactly. Sometimes I wonder why Voldemort killed mum and dad rather than **THEM**."* Harry said, climbing the stairs quickly. *"How can there be any kind of justice in the world where good people like my parents had to die while those... **people** get to live!"*

"The world is a very cruel and unfair place, Harry." Hissed the snake. *"But you mustn't get like this. You don't want to become so lost in your hatred that you lose sight of your goals."*

"When the hell did you get philosophical?" Harry asked, slamming his bedroom door behind him and flopping backwards onto his bed.

"As a snake, one tends to have lots of time to think." Came the answer.

"Sounds like a much more pleasant life than what I've got." Harry said. *"Guess I really screwed up their plan. And I made myself look like a damn idiot in front of them. Some hero of the wizarding world I am, huh?"*

"Even heroes are allowed to slip up now and then, else they wouldn't be human."

"Sometimes I wonder if trying to distance myself from humanity would be a good idea. Go off and be a hermit in some sketchy mountain somewhere. Fire curses at random hikers and stuff." Harry said.

"As amusing a mental image as that is, I don't think the solitary life would be your thing. You need your friends. You need her." Said Boris.

"I know." Harry said, sighing. *"I know I do. Damn it all, why is it that every time there's some plan to do something, I have to go and screw it up?"*

"Because your relatives are barely human themselves." Hissed the snake. *"With all of the faults you seem to put on yourself, you are far more human than they could ever be. You, at least, are honest with your emotions."*

"Emotional outbursts aren't fitting of a Ravenclaw." Harry muttered.

"You have yet to explain to me what a Ravenclaw is, you know." Said Boris in what seemed to be a dry voice.

"Oh, shut up." Harry mumbled.

"Harry?"

That one wasn't Boris. Harry sighed. "Come on in, Tonks."

The girl opened the door, blinking around at Harry's room. "Jeez..."

"Yeah. I live the high life." Harry muttered. "Sorry about that outburst down there, by the way."

"S'alright. How're you feelin'?" Tonks asked, sitting on the edge of the bed next to him.

"Rotten."

"Mum's downstairs giving your relatives a severe dressing down." Tonks said, smiling faintly. "You'd probably get a kick out of it. When I left, she had backed the lot of them into a corner and was threatening

to hex off... well, bits and pieces of them, so to speak... if they didn't start treating you like a living person."

"Yeah, that'll work." Harry muttered.

"C'mon, you're spending the rest of the summer with us. We were up late arguing with the old man through the fire." Tonks said, hopping to her feet.

"Dumbledore?"

"Yup. I gave him a right earful last night, too." Tonks said. "Made what you did downstairs seem like a pleasant conversation."

"And your mum didn't stop you?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised.

"Stop me? She joined in a couple times." Tonks said, grinning.

"I always miss the interesting stuff. Anyway, what was your plan originally gonna be?"

"She wouldn't tell me all of it. Guess she wanted me to act surprised or whatever. We do still have one surprise for you. Mum said I shouldn't tell you until it's closer to the date, but..." Tonks began.

"But?" Harry repeated, getting back to his feet finally.

"Buuuut... have you ever heard of the Quidditch World Cup?"

"Of course I have!" Harry said, looking at Tonks like she had grown a second head. "What proper Quidditch fan wouldn't know about it?"

"We've got tickeeeets." Tonks said in a singsong voice.

"...Wait, what? Tickets? Really?" Harry asked, eyes wide. "Where the hell did you get those? I hear the Cup's always sold out months in advance!"

"It is." Tonks said, prodding Harry into the process of rounding up his belongings. "But the Ministry had so many people working overtime on Sirius' case last year, it seemed like an easy way to pay everyone off without having a strike or riots. See, everyone was supposed to

get overtime pay and stuff, but since Sirius got away, that dolt Fudge felt like no one pulled their weight. Well, of course that didn't sit well with *ANYONE*. Fudge pulled some strings and the employees ended up winning that little battle. Dunno how good the seats are, exactly, but hey, seats are seats, right?"

"Sirius is indirectly responsible for us getting to go to a sold-out event. Remind me to tell him how cool he is." Harry said, packing his things up and sitting on his trunk when he was finished. "Ugh. I've got a headache."

"Awww. Well, let's go see how mum's doing. She should be just about done with the threatening and such." Tonks said.

"No need for that, Nymmy." Andromeda said, stepping into the room. "...Good lord, is this what passes for your bedroom here? I may have to go back down and chew them out awhile longer."

"Can we come watch?" Tonks asked.

"Quiet, you." Andromeda said, rolling her eyes. "Are you alright, Harry?"

"Feeling better now that I know that I get to see the Quidditch World Cup in person rather than reading about the highlights." Harry said.

"*Nymmy*..." Andromeda groaned. "I told you not to say anything!"

"Aww, but look how much better Harry's feeling!" Tonks said, poking Harry in the cheek a few times. Harry swatted her hand away and mock-glared at her.

"...Yes, yes, alright. Sorry things didn't turn out for the better. I was hoping to keep them good and quiet." Andromeda said, pulling her hair out of its bun and taking off the glasses. "How does Minerva wear her hair like this all the time? Ugh..."

"Can you imagine her with it *down*?" Tonks asked. "I can't. Personally, I think she has really short hair and just got a cinnamon bun attached via sticking charm to her head. She wasn't able to null the spell, so she transfigured it to look like hair."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard and I want to figure out a way to see if it's real." Harry stated.

"*ANYWAY...*" Andromeda interrupted. "Hop off your trunk and I'll shrink it down. Dunno if Nymmy said anything about it, but you're staying with us the rest of the summer. The World Cup's on the 25th, so you've got some time to unwind."

"Sounds wonderful." Harry said, getting up once more.

As the three made their way out of Number Four, (the Dursleys never showed up during their departure) Harry suddenly remembered something. "Hey, Andromeda?"

"Yes, dear?"

"You've gotta hear what's been happening this year. Not sure if Tonks told you or not, but Sirius showed up."

"WHAT?"

Harry grinned. And, for the entire trip back to Number Nine, Harry once more told the story of what he had been upto that summer.

Chapter 3 – Memories and Darkness

Harry jerked his head sharply to the right, causing his neck to let out a series of painful-sounding cracks. He smiled and slowly rolled his head to the back, then straightened it up again, opening his eyes to see both Tonks women before him, wincing.

"Jeez, Harry, doesn't that *HURT*?" Asked the younger of the two.

"Not at all." Harry replied. "Feels very good, actually."

"That can't possibly be good, nonetheless." Andromeda said, rubbing at her own neck slowly.

The trio were sitting at the kitchen table at Number Nine, having just finished a lovely breakfast. Harry and Tonks had been having their post-food-inhalation stretches and such.

"Anyway, what's on tap for today?" Harry asked, looking to Andromeda.

"Nothing. In fact, you've got a couple days of 'nothing' for awhile. Like I said, the Cup isn't until the 25th. You two are free to enjoy the rest of the summer until then. It wouldn't hurt to do your homework, of course." Andromeda said, eyeballing both teens.

"Er... yeah. Homework." Harry said, glancing off at Tonks, who had also glanced away from her mother.

"Can't we get it done *after* the Cup?" Tonks mumbled.

"...Well, if you honestly think you can get it done between then at the start of term. But it'll be on your own heads if you *don't*." Andromeda said after thinking it over for a good minute.

"Alright! C'mon, Harry, let's go change and get outta here!" Tonks exclaimed, hopping up from her chair and dashing out of the room.

"...How can she *move* that fast after eating like that?" Harry asked, starting after the girl. "I'm not going to be moving faster than 'slug' speed until that all digests..."

"She's always been that way." Andromeda said, getting to her feet and spelling the dirty dishes clean once more before floating them back to their proper places. "Go on - she'll drag you outside in your pajamas if you aren't hurry."

"Bleh." Harry muttered, leaving the table as well. Exiting the kitchen, Harry slowly plodded his way upstairs. It was a good thing Tonks liked to match her hair and eyes with her wardrobe, else he'd never even reach the staircase before she'd come bounding out, ready to go.

Once in his room, Harry picked out a pair of jeans - looser than he'd normally choose to account for his currently-expanded stomach - and a simple, blue shirt. After changing, he walked over to the bed and tugged the covers back from the pillows. Boris lay, curled up, on one of them.

"*Alright*," Harry hissed, gently tapping the snake. "*Time to get out and experience the day.*"

"*The day can bugger-off.*" Muttered the snake sleepily. "Go 'way."

Harry snorted. "Great, possibly the only displaced, miniature inland taipan and it has to be cheeky. *Up and at 'em, Boris. If we run into Dudley and his gang, I promise you can eat Piers. Though I'll warn you now, he's not much of a meal.*"

Boris opened his eyes lazily and turned to look up at Harry. With something that vaguely resembled a scowl, the snake uncoiled and waited for Harry to lower his arm. Once he had, the snake spiralled up it and under his sleeve. From somewhere, the snake hissed, "*I can't unhinge my jaws enough for the scrawniest of that gang your cousin has. How many rats do I have left?*"

"*Just the one. I can think of another I wish you could get your fangs on, though.*" Harry said.

"It's really eerie when you do that." Came a voice from the doorway.

Harry spun around to see Tonks leaning against it, eyebrow raised. She had on a pair of white jeans and an extremely pale-blue tanktop.

Her eyes were slightly darker than the shirt, but her hair was just as white as the jeans, worn short with fairly long bangs.

"Have you no decency, woman?" Harry asked, mock-glaring at the girl. "I coulda been changing!"

"Yes, yes, and I would've had a good laugh at your scrawny body." Tonks said, stepping into the room and grabbing Harry by the arm. "C'mon! The day's passing us by!"

"*Can I eat HER?*" Boris asked, crankily. Tonks had just missed crushing him.

"*If she remains this cheerful, be my guest.*" Harry hissed back, chuckling.

"What's so funny?" Tonks demanded, turning and staring at Harry.

"Eavesdroppers hoping to catch a glimpse of my body don't get answers." Harry said, walking away from Tonks and crossing his arms behind his head as he made his way back towards the stairs. "Stop lagging behind. After all, 'the day's passing us by!' and all."

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"We goin' anywhere in particular?" Asked Tonks.

"Not really." Harry answered.

"Works for me. Wanna head to the park?"

"Sure."

It didn't take long - only a few blocks away from where they were. Harry smiled as it came into view. Everything seemed so much smaller now that he was older. Had it really just been a few years ago that he had met Tonks and started to change? It all seemed silly to him now - running away to the park and crying himself to sleep under one of the larger playground toys.

Harry sat on one of the swings, leaning forward on his knees. "Has it all gotten smaller, or have we just grown that much?"

"Little of both, probably." Tonks said with a grin, taking the swing next to Harry's.

"I wonder what would've happened if you hadn't found me that morning..."

"Dunno. Life would be a lot more boring. Voldemort would've had a couple chances to take down Hogwarts. I'd be a lot lonelier." Tonks murmured.

"I'd still be holed up at Number Four, getting beat up by Dudley and his friends. I'd still be alone." Harry said, lazily swinging. "I wonder how long it would've taken to lose myself if that had happened."

"What do you mean?"

"I lived a bad life for over ten years. I try not to let it show, but I've got a lot of darkness left in my heart. Lashing out like I did at Aunt Petunia? Nearly killing Aunt Marge? I haven't even fully trained myself to handle magic... I'd hate to think of what could happen if I just gave in and let the darkness take me. I mean... would I become like Voldemort?" Harry asked, glancing over at Tonks.

"I don't think you would. You may explode every once in awhile, but... everyone does at one point or another. I don't think you have what it takes to become a dark wizard, Harry." Tonks said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It'd take something really awful happening for you to just let go like that, yeah..." Tonks offered.

"I know what it would take." Harry said, eyes narrowing as he sighed.

"What?"

"Losing you." Harry said simply. "If something happened and I lost you... I dunno what would happen. I'd probably fly off the handle and

just go insane. You're the one who saved me and... you really do help keep me in line. Without you there..."

Tonks tilted her head for a moment, then gave herself a sharp push sideways, causing her swing to bump into Harry's. Harry nearly toppled forward out of his, turning to glare at the girl, who smiled in return and said, "Stop being so gloomy. It's a beautiful day, I'm not going anywhere, and you're not gonna be some Dark Prince."

"Oh god, that title alone would keep me from going dark. 'Harry Potter - Dark Prince Who Lived' - Ugh." Harry said, scrunching up his face.

Tonks snickered. "You'd dress in long, pitch black robes with a hood to hide your face, which'd be permanently screwed up in a grimace or something."

"I don't wanna look like Filch." Harry said, jutting his lower lip out.

Tonks cracked up. "Ohh... oh, jeez, Harry. Did you *have* to give me that mental image?"

"Did you have to pull the term 'Dark Prince' out of nowhere?" Harry replied, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Yes I did." Said Tonks, nodding vigorously.

"I can't wait until the Cup." Harry said, pushing himself and swinging more properly. "I can only imagine how long it's gonna last."

"Ergh. I wonder if they'll have to postpone opening Hogwarts if it runs too long." Tonks wondered aloud.

"I hope it doesn't run *too* long. After a certain period, it'd have to get tedious." Harry said.

"Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh?"

"Uh-oh."

"Tonks, define 'uh-oh'." Harry said, rolling his eyes.

"Idiot Squad at nine sharp." Tonks said, pointing.

Harry groaned. He didn't want to turn his head to look, even though he knew he had to. "How many?" He asked.

"Six, including your cousin."

"Damn." Harry said, getting to his feet. "Can't they let me have one nice day outside?"

"Apparently not. We gonna take off?" Tonks asked.

Harry began to open his mouth, then sighed and shook his head. "No. I'm tired of running, Tonks."

"But we can't use magic here! Not only would we get expelled from school, we'd get in all sorts of trouble. Not to mention--"

"I'm not *going* to use magic. Not really." Harry said. "Am I a Seeker or aren't I? The Ministry can't detect Metamorphmagi transformations, can they?"

"Not that I know. We're so few and far between, they've never really thought of making a department solely to deal with us. Besides, what're we gonna do? Turn into thieves and start robbing wizarding folk in disguise?"

"Interesting thought. Anyway, I have an idea. Just follow my lead if things get too heated. If all else fails, we use the second shortcut through Mr. Bryer's back yard to get to your place faster." Harry said.

"I hate thorn bushes." Tonks said, grumpily.

Sure enough, one of Dudley's lackeys caught sight of Harry and Tonks and was quick to point them out to his boss. Dudley, looking like he had eaten a few whales and a clown, smiled darkly and started his slow waddle into the park.

"Hullo, Big D." Harry said, swinging once more.

"Having a date with your girlfriend?" Dudley asked, sneering.

"Course I am. This is where we met, after all." Harry said.

"You're gonna pay for what you said, y'know. Dad's gonna beat you bloody when you come back." Dudley said, chortling.

"That hippo can do whatever he bloody well wants, as I have no intention to return. I'm gonna have a long talk with the headmaster this year, see." Harry explained.

"Don't you call him a hippo." Dudley growled, balling one hand into a fist and waving the rest of his gang over.

"Or you'll do what? Fall on me and choke me with your fat?"

That was all it took. Dudley threw back one porky arm and threw it forward at a speed a boy of his size had no business having. Harry had been expecting one of his cousin's telegraphed punches and dug his feet sharply into the ground on the way forward. Dudley's punch missed and he toppled over, his many chins bouncing off the dirt at Harry's feet.

"Don't forget about Boris, Big D." Harry said.

"I don't care about **UAAHHHH!**" Dudley screamed. Boris had poked his head out of the bottom of Harry's jeans and hissed loudly at the boy, causing him to scramble backwards. As Harry reached down to pick Boris up, Dudley tried saving face by hopping to his feet as fast as his bulk would allow.

"See, Dudley..." Harry began slowly, lightly petting Boris as he glanced up. "I've grown more than a bit tired of you and your parasites coming after me. You know I can sneak into the house without waking me up. If you even think about coming after me again, I'll slip in and let Boris kill you while you sleep. Or I could always let him get your parents. That way, you'll either end up in an orphanage or with Aunt Marge. And wouldn't that be lovely?"

"You wouldn't dare." Dudley growled. "You don't have the balls!"

"Oh?"

Harry smiled and, using his powers, made his eyes quickly jump from their usual emerald green color to a bright, seering red. Half of the gang currently with Dudley yelled, one of them took off running, and the rest hid behind Dudley. Dudley himself looked like he wanted to go running after the one who escaped, but had to act tough in front of the rest of them.

"Yeah, tubby. Stop bugging me and Harry." Tonks piped in, stepping up beside Harry and sending her own eyes through a rainbow of colors, all in rapidfire succession. "We've taken out worse than you."

"Yes. I'd hate to spill any blood here, you know. It's such a nice little park. But if you don't turn and run off right now, I'll show you what I'm really made of." Harry said, his voice growling out the words. And just to add a bit of added threat to them, he shifted to Parseltongue and spat, *"No matter what I say right now, you're going to squeal and flee, aren't you?"*

Despite not understanding a word of what Harry had said at the end, the gang did indeed do just that. Dudley was first to yell and take off running. The others were quick to follow. As they rounded the nearest corner, both Harry and Tonks let their eyes slip back to normal.

"That was fun!" Harry said, smiling.

"What'd you say in Parseltongue?" Asked Tonks.

When Harry told her, all she could do was dissolve into giggles again.

"You know, I'm kinda sad we couldn't get to the hair-changing part of the plan." Harry said, looking around before using his powers to grow his hair out further.

"Ack, you look kinda like Leon." Tonks said.

"Do I? ...Maybe I made it a bit too long." Harry said, shortening it to somewhere just below his neck. "That better?"

"I dunno. I think the short-and-messy look is best on you." Tonks said. "Grow your bangs out a little more, though."

Harry did as he told, though he frowned and had to brush his hair over his ears to see properly. "I don't think this is gonna work."

"Not *that* long, silly." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "C'mon, let's go back home and we'll see if we can't pick a hairstyle that works for you."

"What did I get myself into?" Harry lamented as Tonks grabbed one of his hands and began tugging him off towards Number Nine.

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"Does your head still hurt?"

"Yeah. Still sore."

"What do you think it meant?"

"Dunno. I wish I did. It isn't the first time I've had strange dreams, but..."

"Should you contact that headmaster of yours?"

"I was thinking about it. Seemed the best course of action at the moment."

Harry was sitting in the kitchen of Number Nine, nursing an awful headache. It spawned at some point during the nightmare that had awakened him just an hour prior. He had gone downstairs to get something to drink in hopes of it somehow helping. He had brought Boris along for company and someone to talk to - he hadn't been screaming when he woke up, so the Tonks women were still fast asleep in their beds.

Or, at least, that's where Harry assumed they were.

"Don't I keep telling you how strange that is?" Came a half-yawning voice from the doorway.

"Sorry." Harry said, in English this time, smiling as he looked over. "I didn't wake you up, I hope."

"Naw." Tonks said, padding into the room and heading for the fridge. "Woke up and my stomach was grumbling. Need...cake."

Harry chuckled.

"What're you doin' up? You don't look so hot." Tonks said, peeking over the fridge door.

"Trying to figure out what's going on with my dreams. Been having strangely realistic nightmares this summer. I've already written to Dumbledore once, but... I think I may need to write him again. I can't be positive, since everything's faded since I woke up, but... I think someone's been killed." Harry said, sighing as he stared at his half-empty glass of water.

"Killed?" Tonks repeated, walking over to the table and sitting after she had gotten herself a slice of cake. "Whatcha mean? Who was killed?"

"Dunno. Some old man." Harry said. "Wormtail was there. Wormtail and someone in a chair."

"Wormtail? Now what're you dreamin' about that creepy little rat for?"

"I wish I knew." Harry muttered. "I also wish I knew who was in the chair. I... have my suspicions, but none of them make any sense. Because the only person I could think of Wormtail bowing to is Voldemort."

"Think he's found another form to return in?" Asked Tonks, frowning.

"Could very well be. Wish I could've seen him, dammit. If he's jumped into another possible Defense professor, and I told Dumbledore, I might be able to save us all some trouble." Harry said, letting out a long breath.

"Yeah, I'd say write Dumbledore. He may be a jerk, but he's still a powerful wizard."

"Yeah."

"Think you'll be able to get back to sleep?"

"I doubt it. I've been down here a good hour and this headache's only dulled a little. I don't think I'd be able to go back to sleep as long as it's there. It's like my scar's burning up." Harry said.

"Ouch. Well... do you want some company?" Asked Tonks.

"You don't have to stay up on my account." Harry replied, waving a hand dismissively. "Besides, I brought Boris along."

"Yeah, well, I'm still hanging around 'til I get sleepy again, at least." Tonks said. "Not good leaving you with your thoughts."

"Oi."

"Well, it's true! You always get all 'Ohh, things are awful' or like... 'I don't like *FOOD* anymore!' and stuff!" Tonks exclaimed.

"I have never said either of those!" Harry protested, glaring at the girl.

"Want some cake?" Offered Tonks.

"Nah."

"*SEE!*"

"What? Hey, that doesn't prove anything! I've never *said* that!" Harry argued, scowling.

"You may as well have!" Tonks said in a singsong voice, grinning.

"Oh lord. I may have to retreat to my room just to escape you. I can't deal with Tonks Madness at 3 in the morning." Harry said, shaking his head slowly.

"Tonks Madness?"

"Tonks Madness."

"I take offense to that." Said the girl.

"So do something about it." Replied Harry in a dry voice.

A minute later and Harry was on the ground, laughing like an idiot as Tonks, who had pinned him down, was tickling him mercilessly. "You asked for it!" She cried.

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"I can't believe you're keeping your hair grown longer." Hissed Boris an hour later, when Harry was back in his room. He had just finished his letter to Dumbledore and had sent Hedwig off into the night.

"She's very persuasive." Harry said, shrugging as he sat on the edge of the bed. His hair was now down to his shoulders again, with his bangs just short enough that Harry could see well. When Harry complained that Tonks wanted him to have a mullet, she told him he was *supposed* to grow it out on the sides, too.

"Feeling better now?"

"Much, though that dream still worries me." Harry said, sighing. *"I dunno. Something about it stood out too much. Dunno how to explain it any better than that."*

"It is strange..." Boris said, curled up on a pillow. *"But try not to think about it again. Your headmaster is sure to know something, surely."*

"I hope so." Harry said, flopping back and staring up at the ceiling. *"Hey, Boris?"*

"Yes?"

"I know this is an odd question, especially given that you're a snake and we're fairly new as far as knowing each other goes, but..." Harry began, pausing to think about what he wanted to say. *"It's... about Tonks. Do you think that... I dunno... the two of us... maybe..."*

"Are you asking if I think she would be a good choice as your mate?" Asked the snake.

"Well... um... that kinda depends on what form of 'mate' you're using." Harry said, glancing aside. "There's a couple and...um..."

"The form is entirely dependant on what you feel it should be." Said Boris. "Do you care about her?"

"Of course."

"Does she care about you?"

"I...think she does. She haskissed me a couple times. Nothing serious or anything, but... yeah." Harry said.

"I don't see the problem, then."

"It's just... I seem to be a magnet for trouble. I don't know why. I don't wantto be. But I seem to have a think for saving people. It would be nice if no more dangers found their way to Hogwarts, I could finish my schooling in peace, and then Tonks and I could..."

"Tonks and you could... what?"

Harry sighed. "I dunno. Seems silly to think that far into the future. Every year at that school seems to age me at least three times as much as I should. It takes a lot out of me, the stuff that happens. You know those stories I told you about, yeah? Each of those has forced me to leave more and more of my childhood behind. I know I should be looking forward to becoming an adult, but... I don't want to do it before it's time, you know? I want to enjoywhat's left of my childhood. It was nice just swinging in the park earlier..."

"Perhaps you'll luck out this year." Boris said.

"I wish I could believe that. But between the track record and these weird dreams I've been having, I just have this feeling that something dark is going to happen. I don't like the feeling one little bit, either. But back to the point... I don't want Tonks to keep getting tangled up in these stupid adventures I seem to keep having. I don't want her getting hurt. Or worse. I meant what I said earlier. If I lost Tonks... I dunno if I could keep on the so-called 'light' side of things." Harry explained.

"Would you kill?" Asked the snake.

"I already have." Harry replied, darkly.

"A man possessed, a basilisk, and a memory?"

"The man counts, even if he was little more than a husk for Voldemort."

"But you don't remember killing him?"

"I blacked out before it happened. But my hands were doing a number on his face. It was sizzling pretty badly." Harry said.

"I see. Have you actually seen a real person die, then?"

"Not technically." Harry muttered. "There always seems to be some way around that. But... if someone killed Tonks? Yes. I would kill. I would kill without any hesitation. She means everything to me. Losing her means losing myself, Boris. The darkness would win."

"You don't think you would eventually move on? That a time would exist when the grieving would stop? Would you be able to love again?"

"No. For all intents and purposes, going dark means giving my heart and my soul over to the darkness. I don't want that to happen." Harry said, his eyes slipping shut.

"Then fight for her. Keep her safe at all costs. Get stronger, Harry. Strong enough so that you won't have to worry. Keep her at your side and teach her as you progress. You've mentioned to me that you don't think that magic should be classified as 'light' and 'dark' which makes me wonder why you've spoken of it so much today."

"It's hard to explain. I just know that if I lost myself like that, any helpful methods of using magic would go out the window. And believe me... I've thought of plenty of ways simple, seemingly innocent spells could be harnessed to bring pain and suffering. I have a lot of time to think. And I haven't had much reason to think of happy things lately. I'm glad I'm out of Number Four and all, but I know I'll have to return. I

know that Voldemort will probably come after me again somehow. I just hope I can stay on the narrow ledge that I seem to've been put on. Sometimes it's hard." Harry said.

"Choices often are." Agreed the snake. "But that is what separates you from the so-called 'bad guys,' Harry. You worry about these things. You may have thought of hurtful uses for your magic spells... but how would you feel, under normal circumstances, if you were to use a spell in such a manner?"

"Like I was no better than Wormtail." Harry said.

"Then there you go. As long as you are true to yourself, you won't be able to let the darkness win. As long as you continue to love, and as long as those around you continue to love you, you'll be safe."

"You've got a bad habit of getting philosophical, you know that?"

"You started it." Boris pointed out.

"What? I did not!" Harry exclaimed.

"Did so."

"Did NOT."

"Did so."

"Did n-- Dammit, has Tonks been teaching you how to argue?" Harry grumbled, switching back to English.

"Not as all."

"Can you even understand English?"

"Of course I can. You haven't been paying much attention, have you?" Asked Boris.

"Wh... Okay, I guess I haven't. I blame the lack of sleep, though. Normally I wouldn't be asking stupid questions like that." Harry said.

"So try and get more rest. Is your headache gone now?"

"Yeah."

"*Are you sleepy?*"

"Kinda."

"*At the very least,*" Hissed Boris, moving from one pillow to another as Harry spun a quarter turn so his head could rest on one, as well, "*Close your eyes as we talk. Even if you don't drift off, it's better than staring at the ceiling all night.*"

"I guess you're right." Harry said. "I think I'm gonna try and get back to sleep though, if that's alright with you. We can talk when I wake up."

"*If that is what you wish.*" Boris replied. "*Goodnight, Harry.*"

"Night. And... thanks."

"*You're quite welcome.*"

Chapter 4 – The Dead of Night

Harry stared out the window of his room. It was night out. It would continue being night out for upwards of three hours, seventeen minutes, and somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen seconds.

"*You're far too restless.*" Commented Boris, curled up on a pillow across the room.

"Something just doesn't feel right." Harry said, leaning his forehead against the glass.

"*What do you mean?*"

"I've just got this bad feeling something's going to happen at the Cup." Harry explained. "No real evidence of it, but my instinct is telling me to be cautious."

"*Instinct, huh?*"

"Get chased by a monster or two, you learn to trust your instincts rather fast."

The snake uncoiled slightly to get a better look at the teen. "*Perhaps. But there must be something to be said of common sense, as well.*"

"Common sense lost all meaning for me when I fought a guy with two faces." Harry said, dryly. After a moment, he scowled and turned away from the window. "It doesn't help that my odd dreams have been continuing."

"*And what has your headmaster had to say about them?*"

"Simple that he'll look into matters and not to worry. Same crap he says every time I send him a letter with a worry or problem. Dumbledore isn't my favorite person in the world." Harry said, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"*And why would that be?*"

"He's the reason I keep having to return to Number Four. He's never around to help me out of these damned situations I keep getting into at *his* school. If he hadn't been out of the school in my first year, I wouldn't have had to go after Quirrell myself. If he had made *any* kind of move, I wouldn't have had to go and nearly get killed by a basilisk. The only time I think he *might* have helped me was when he condoned Hermione to use her time turner to help save Sirius! He refuses to speak to me about what, exactly, the blood wards are or why they're so special. He refuses to tell me where my parents are buried. He refuses to treat me like anything but a *PAWN*."

"*Harsh words.*" Boris said.

"I've had all night to think about them." Muttered Harry, running a hand back through his hair. "He acts like he's my guardian or something. And I don't like it one bit, Boris. He'd never admit it and I doubt anyone but Tonks and I have noticed, but he's remarkably manipulative. I dunno if he's using wandless magic to influence people or if there's just something about him that people trust, but it's ridiculous. Personally, I think it has something to do with his eyes. That twinkle in them bothers me."

"*Why?*"

Harry leaned back on his arms, staring up at the ceiling with a frown on his face. "It's... hard to explain. It just feels like they're boring into me - like he's trying to force the truth out of me. That or read my mind. Gonna look into that this year. See if there's any way to read minds or control people. I trust him enough to say he's not using some form of the Imperius on anyone, though."

"*So he appears to all as a kindly old man who can do no wrong. All the while, he's taken control behind the scenes and you feel he's moving those around him as though they were chess pieces?*" Asked the snake.

"Something like that. He also never said why I even need the blood protection on Number Four *OR* why we can't erect something similar *HERE*. I don't feel right about Tonks' house being unprotected." Harry said.

"You should still try to sleep, you know." Commented Boris after a few minutes of silence.

"I wouldn't be able to drift off." Harry said. "I've just got too much on my mind. I'll probably pass out at some point from inactivity, but I doubt the rest will be sound."

"Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"Too much. My mind's rather cluttered at the moment. I may not like being stuck at the Dursleys' for the summer, but it does give me time away from the wizarding world. Time away from *him*. Lets me think clearly. Unfortunately, it tends to take all summer to get my mind straightened back out. And each time I do, I find a few faults with the man. I won't believe for a second that he wouldn't be able to offer up wards here that're at least as strong as those on Number Four. Not with how everyone claims him to be the most powerful wizard around. That's another thing I don't like..."

"Him being powerful? Why?"

"It isn't though I haven't seen the headmaster perform magic - he's saved me a couple times I can think of. It just seems that if he's so powerful, like everyone claims, he should've been able to do something about all the stuff that's happened in his school. The most he's done is scare some dementors and use wandless magic to keep me from smashing into the ground. And he stopped a troll. Yet he left all the big fights up to me. A guy shouldn't have to kill before he reaches puberty." Harry said, a dark hint of amusement in his voice. "Yet that's exactly what I've done."

"Ahh, back to this train of thought." Said the snake.

"Can't help it. Death bothers me. Especially since it seems to follow me the hell around." Harry said, flopping back and crossing his arms. "It's part of the reason I'm so paranoid about the Cup. And you remember the stuff I read to you from the Prophet. Something's going on at Hogwarts, only no one's bloody saying what it *is*. Hogwarts doesn't *need* any spectacular events or anything. There's more than enough 'excitement' coming from the things out to kill people!"

"It's going to be an interesting year for me, isn't it?" Asked Boris.

"Probably. I'm getting used to this stuff happening, eerie as it is to admit. Can't imagine you'll be very thrilled with it all by the end of the term, either." Harry said.

"Lovely."

Finally, Harry closed his eyes and yawned. "I need to be stronger, Boris. I'm just not sure how to do that while I'm still learning about the basics. Kinda hard to work out advanced magic when you still don't have certain points of the simpler stuff down, y'know?"

"You'll find a way."

"Sooner or later. I'm hoping for sooner." Harry murmured. "Too much happening this year. Too many chances for trouble. It's well and good for me to claim I want to protect Tonks and keep her safe. It's harder to follow through on. What if we get seperated? There's more than one way to spirit a person off. It bugs me that Voldemort didn't reappear last year. It really does. Trelawney's damn prediction keeps coming back to me. It feels like pieces are fitting together in a twisted sort of puzzle, only I'm not allowed to watch. I just have to guess what's gone where. I don't like it."

"Few would, Harry. Few would." Said Boris. He coiled back up on the pillow, watching Harry until the boy had drifted off into another restless sleep. *"Let us hope the puzzle doesn't get finished before you're ready to see the picture it forms."*

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Harry felt his way forward, being unable to properly see in the dark yet. He wasn't sure where he was, but he knew it felt familiar for some reason. The familiarity was outweighed, however, by the creeping dread. This place was too silent - too *still*. There were no people moving around. There were no cars driving along the streets. The mere sounds of nocturnal animals and insects was not present. Not even the wind would blow to help Harry try and establish some sense of direction in this place.

The only beacon in the darkness rose above the rest of the buildings, at the end of a long street. A small mansion of sorts with a light coming from a lone, upstairs window. It almost seemed to phase in and out of reality - Harry was having a hard time keeping track of it despite the fact that his eyes never left the spot once he had locked onto it. There was a vile fog in the air, which seemed almost supernatural in and of itself. It wasn't being helpful, in any case. And the distinct feeling of cold, like he got when dementors drew near, had been coursing through his veins ever since he awoke in this dismal, dark location.

The hair on the back of his neck rose when the silence was violently broken. A siren, somewhere behind him, had started to go off. Loud and seemingly unending, it tore through the darkness like a knife. The window once more became visible and, feeling as though death itself was coming for him, he took off running.

The street was half destroyed, as though heavy objects had smashed into it and then subsequently been removed. Harry did his best to keep himself from tripping. He had long since tried to find his wand, only to realize that he had lost it at some point. Chills were running down his spine now as he collided abruptly with the large, iron gate in front of the mansion. For once, it seemed as though luck was on his side, as one half of it was open. After passing through, the siren in the distance was cut off. The noise didn't wind down slowly, it had simply stopped dead. There was nothing natural about this place in Harry's mind. Something had cleared the town out - something had removed all traces of life. The question was *what*. And if no one was around, why was the light upstairs on?

One of the two doors leading into the building was open. But unlike the gate he had previously been through, this passage forward made Harry once more fill with dread. Though there was no wind to push it, the door blew back and forth slowly, as if rocked by some unseen hand.

Carefully making his way inside, Harry was met with an even stranger sight. The mansion, though it looked new from the outside, looked as if it should have been condemned and destroyed ages ago.

Everything was black with dirt and rust, along with the unmistakable splatter marks that could only be made by blood.

Harry briefly pondered his options. He could either take his chances back outside, in the fog, cold, and darkness... or continue pushing forward into the rusted, blood-soaked abode. Neither was particularly pleasant.

It didn't take him long to find the room with the light coming from it. He had made sure to glance up as he ran between gate and door. He was having trouble navigating the place, however, as his feet kept piercing the ground beneath him. Near the top of the stairs, he had nearly snapped his ankle as his foot suddenly pushed through a step rather than come to rest on top of it.

A foul odor was emanating from the room, and Harry could very faintly hear a voice. Though quiet, it was very high-pitched and scratchy, as though the speaker hadn't talked in years. Harry felt he should remember this voice, as it certainly felt as if he had heard it before, though he wasn't able to recall where.

Harry reached out and took hold of the old, crusted-over doorknob and twisted it, pushing it open. Light flooded Harry's eyes, causing him to gasp aloud and clamp his eyes shut. Slowly, so as to allow them to adjust, Harry let them open once more.

He immediately wished he hadn't.

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Boris' eyes snapped open as Harry let out a strangled scream. The boy's eyes then opened as wide as they could and, before the snake could ask what was wrong, Harry had bolted out of bed, slammed open his door, and ran out.

The Tonks women had been awakened by the scream - it wouldn't have surprised Andromeda if everyone around them had been, as well. The two had met out in the hall, immediately turning to face the bathroom, where the sounds of violent retching could be heard. Tonks made a face, looking to her mother. Andromeda nodded and motioned for her daughter to wait in Harry's room.

"Harry...?" Asked the woman, stepping into the doorway. "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

When Harry's head rose from its position over the toilet, the look he gave her made her blood run cold. His pupils were smaller than Andromeda had ever seen on a person, and that included both victims and attackers back in Voldemort's reign. There was an unbridled horror lurking in that reduced blackness. Harry tried opening his mouth to speak, but had to quickly reposition his head over the toilet.

"Harry, what happened!" Andromeda asked, quickly crossing the room and kneeling down next to the boy, rubbing his back slowly. "Was it a nightmare?"

Harry quickly nodded his head between heaves, drawing in a shuddered breath.

"It's okay, Harry. It was only a dream - you're awake now. Whatever it was, it's gone now. It can't get to you here." Said the woman soothingly.

A good minute later, when Harry had emptied his tank and the dry heaving had stopped, he was sitting, leaning back against the wall opposite the toilet. Andromeda had gotten him a cup of water and a peppermint to get the taste out of his mouth. He had also calmed down, his eyes returning to normal, for which Andromeda was more than happy. She didn't want to see that look on anyone ever again. By this time, Tonks had also entered the room, Boris coiled around her left hand.

"Feel like talking about it?" Asked the elder of the women.

"Was... was just a bad dream. That's all it was." Harry murmured, his voice hoarse. "It... it was just a dream."

"You scared your snake." Said Tonks, crossing the room to sit next to Harry, holding her hand up.

"Sorry, Boris." Harry whispered, offering the creature a ghost of a smile.

"What happened?" Asked the snake. "One minute you're sleeping peacefully... then you jack-knife out of bed!"

Harry let out a weak laugh. Then, seeing the confused looks on the women, he explained what Boris had said. Turning back to the snake, he asked, "Where did you come up with that term?"

"You'd be surprised." Replied Boris.

After a few minutes, the headache Harry had gained was ebbing away. He had been able to replay the events in his mind without getting sick again, though he saw no need to induce vomiting on the women with what he had seen. Instead, he gave them a vague rundown of the town he had been in; of the race towards the mansion. How, once inside, he had made his way to the lit room and how he had opened the door leading in. From there, all he would say was that he hoped to never see any living creature in such a state for as long as he lived.

Some of the fear Andromeda had seen in his eyes had returned slightly, threatening its way inward. Tonks had slipped an arm around Harry's shoulders and pulled him close. He didn't fight it. Rather, the warmth he felt reassured him that he really was awake and that the skinless, dripping humans from his nightmare wouldn't be able to find him now. His eyes closed again, his mind trying to find an image to counter the hellish scene he had walked in on.

"Try not to fall asleep on me, 'kay?" Murmured Tonks, leaning her head against Harry's.

"I'm not going back to sleep tonight." Harry replied, voice still soft. "I don't think I'm gonna eat much today. ...and... and I'd appreciate no one having any... any meat for awhile, if it isn't too much trouble..."

"No trouble at all." Andromeda said. She had taken to sitting up on the long counter in the room, watching her daughter comfort their poor guest. She was doing an admirable job of it, too - Harry's breathing was slow and steady again and he had smiled a few times. It was definitely the right direction to go in.

That being said, distraction was certainly on Andromeda's mind. The odd request left her wondering what, indeed, he had seen in his dream. For a moment, she had considered asking if she could borrow Albus' pensieve, but quickly erased that idea. She didn't want Harry to remember that scene at all if she could help it.

Instead, she chose to hop down from the counter, heading for the doorway. "It's almost seven, anyway. I'm going to go make some breakfast. Just some pancakes and toast, if that's alright. Something simple."

"Sounds good to me." Tonks said, glancing and smiling over at her mother. Then, looking back at Harry, she asked, "Sure you don't feel like eating? Not like you don't have room now."

"Urgh... don't remind me..." Harry mumbled. "...I think some dry toast might be good, though."

"That's the spirit. I'll call when it's ready. You two can stay right where you are for now. I don't think Harry should be moving quickly for awhile." Andromeda said. "It's still a good five hours before we need to be in place to get to the Cup. Rest for now."

"Be in place?" Harry asked, opening his eyes and glancing to Tonks as Andromeda headed downstairs.

"Portkey." Tonks responded. "I've travelled by it a couple times - can never land quite right. It's... sorta like apparating, only more nauseating."

"Oh, great." Harry said. "Just what I need."

"Ah, you'll do fine. Just don't spew on me if the urge arises, alright?"

"Yes, ma'am." Harry muttered.

Not long after, Andromeda sent out the call that breakfast was done. Tonks helped Harry up and the trio - Boris had made his way back onto Harry's arm - headed downstairs.

Chapter 5 – The Nightmare Begins

Harry landed hard, groaning quietly.

Tonks started giggling wildly from somewhere behind him.

"Oh dear." Said Andromeda, walking over and helping Harry up. "I probably should have warned you better..."

"Yeah." Harry muttered, getting back to his feet and coughing some dirt up. After that, he brushed the front of his clothes off, scowling. Travelling by portkeys, Harry decided, was *not* his favorite method of getting around. They had left shortly after breakfast, which Harry was again regretting having. Travel via portkey was also rather nauseating.

After he was through cleaning himself up again, Harry took a look around. The area was caked in a thick fog, which he vaguely wondered had something to do with security. It just didn't feel... natural. From what he *could* see, however, there were literally hundreds of tents set up all over the area, which seemed to be some awful mix of swamp and forest.

"Oi oi, don't tell me we're camping out." Harry said, making a face.

"Yup! Don't worry though," Tonks said. "They're all magically expanded."

"One's big enough for all of us and then some." Andromeda added. "Come on, you two. The check-in wizard should be around somewhere..."

For the next twenty minutes, the three walked around the perimeter of the campgrounds, apparently searching for a middle-aged man in a beret. During the walk, Harry had time to catch glimpses of what could only be *normal* wizarding families. Children running around playing with toy wands, parents sitting on old logs, talking with others. It was painfully obvious that the wizarding community was blind when it came to Muggle clothing, though. After the fourth time Harry saw a male wizard wearing a sun dress, he had to stop looking about.

"Honestly, what's wrong with people?" He asked aloud. "Are they just completely stupid, or what? It's not like Muggle clothing is that much different than wizarding stuff! Sure, wizards have a lot more robe-like clothing, so I can at understand the occasional guy in a dress. But still..."

"A problem some of us have wondered about for years." Andromeda dryly commented. "You've gotta watch out for the old folks in bikinis."

"Old folks in bikinis?" Harry repeated, his voice a bit higher pitched. "Oh god, my stomach can't take any more disgusting images today..."

"You could always just keep your eyes *me*!" Tonks suggested, grinning. "I *am* gorgeous, after all!"

"Yes, yes, Nymmy, you're adorable." Harry replied, his mind still doing somersaults in regards to the thought of old people in skimpy swimwear. He was smacked on the arm a moment later, which brought him out of his waking nightmare. "**OUCH!**"

"Serves you right." Tonks said, huffing. "Unless you really do think I am adorable, in which case, I'm sorry and will treat you to ice cream later."

"Mmm. Ice cream. I could do with something cold. Bloody hot here." Harry said.

"I can conjure up some ice water for you lot, if you want." Andromeda said. "Should have said something sooner."

"Would you? Boris is making contented noises, so he's fine, but I'm just shy of melting" Harry said.

"Oh, he made it through the trip? I thought you were gonna leave him behind." Tonks said. "Where is he?"

"Never you mind." Harry said, tugging at the collar of his shirt. "Anyway, yeah, he made it. I tried convincing him to stay at your place, but he wanted to come along in the off chance I need extra protection."

"Ah, there he is." Andromeda finally said. "About time. HINDRET! HEY! HEYYYY! ...Oh, damn it all, you two stay here. Bilford Hindret's half-deaf and won't do anything about it. I'll be right back."

"The wacky hijinks have already started." Harry noted, watching Andromeda run over to a grey-haired wizard in a toga.

"Worried?" Asked Tonks, nudging the boy with her elbow.

"More than I'd care to admit." Harry said, eyes narrowing as he once more glanced around. "We're in an unknown location, there are countless people here, and the security seems to be nonexistent. There are very few Ministry officials around, judging by how long we had to walk to find somebody to help us. What's stopping something from happening?"

"Common sense? I dunno. The fact that everyone here just wants to see the Cup?"

"Not good enough for me." Harry stated, hands slipping into his pockets. "Not nearly good enough. At least half the Auror divisions need to be stationed here. With this many people, if something happens, it'll be a riot. No one is prepared for something like that. People would be running everywhere in a panic, not knowing what to do."

"Why are you so paranoid, anyway?" Asked Tonks.

"When have I ever been wrong?" Harry asked, quietly. "If you've missed it, I've got quite a bad track record of calling things before they happen. I've gotten into a habit of attracting dangerous people and creatures."

"Look, I'm sure the Ministry has taken precautions." Tonks said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "If this place isn't warded like mad, it'd surprise me."

"Do you really think so?" Harry asked. "I don't believe that bumbling twit of a Minister we have would bother. He's in the same mindset as everyone else, thinking nothing could possibly happen."

"Alrighty, then - what are *you* going to do if something happens? Let's say that riot really *does* break out. What are you gonna do?" Asked Tonks.

"Keep a close eye on my wand." Harry said. "I've got Boris camped out near it. In that kind of craze, there's no telling what might happen. I'm not losing my wand. It would make me an easy target. If people are being disarmed or having their wands stolen, it's all the same. Only if someone actually takes it somehow, they could frame you for just about anything, couldn't they? The wand doesn't track *who* is casting the spell. Merely that the spell was *cast*."

"Second, I would stay put. Preferably somewhere easily defendable. I'm hoping those tents are more sturdy than they look. Barring that, I'd say the stadium - I have to *assume* there is one - would be the best place to be. Third, which ties directly into the second point, is to be somewhere that I'd be able to observe what's happening so I'd know what to do from there. If the stadium is the safe spot, that would probably be best. With all these people, it'd have to seat a good many people, so the chances of there being high ground is pretty good. If it's anything like the pitch at Hogwarts, the stands are gonna be up high so that people can observe the game better."

"Once learning what's happening and, with any luck, who's behind it, the fourth point comes is - finding a way out. Obviously, we can't jury-rig a portkey up. From what you told me this morning, the Ministry frowns on people making their own."

"Highly illegal." Tonks said, nodding.

"Right, so that's out. The two of us can't apparate yet, so that's out. Your mother could probably apparate, but I doubt she'd be able to tote both of us along with her. And this is all providing that there aren't anti-apparition wards placed. Knowing the idiocy of the Ministry of Magic, it wouldn't surprise me if that was the *only* type of warding this place got. Okay, so then what? We don't know how far these supposed wards extend. We couldn't just run and run until we get to a point where we *think* they might have ended. In a place like this, I seriously doubt there's any place to floo, either. Meaning that if

anything happens, we're all screwed. We'd have to fight back, because there'd be no proper escape routes."

"You've thought this out pretty hard." Tonks said, eyebrows raised.

"Of course I have." Harry said, turning to look into her eyes. "Someone has to. I'm not gonna let you get hurt because Fudge thinks nothing bad could possibly happen."

Tonks blinked. "Wait wait wait. You thought that whole bigass speech up about what we should do just because you want to keep *me* safe?"

"You, your mum, Boris, myself..." Harry said, shrugging lightly. "Anyone else I can save. I seem to have a thing for saving people now, too."

"So I've noticed. Anything else?"

"Not off the top of my head." Harry replied. "I've sure I could expand the speech by a good bit if I thought about it long enough, though. I've got just about every possible thing covered, I think. Humans attacking, creatures attacking, *vampires* attacking, bombs, guns, small artillery, *LARGE* artillery... I wonder if I could Accio a tank..."

"...You sure you're feeling alright?" Asked Tonks, cocking an eyebrow.

"Hm? Yes, just fine, why do you ask?" Harry said, blinking.

"You've thought way too much into this."

"Yeah, well, what else was I gonna do? Anyway, trust me - if anything happens, I'm sure I can deal with it."

"*Don't be too confident.*" Boris hissed from somewhere around Harry's left arm. "*You never know what things lurk in the dark parts of the planet.*"

"And what would you know about the dark parts of the planet?" Replied Harry in English. "You've been acting funny today, you know that?"

He received a simple, meaningless hiss in response.

"What's up with him?" Asked Tonks.

"No idea. He seems aggitated about something, though. Has ever since we arrived. Bloody won't stay *STILL*." Harry said, making a face as he glared at his shirt. "I've just assumed it's meant that he's as tense as I am, though."

"Ahh. Oh, look, mum's finally on her way back!" Tonks said, pointing at her mother.

"Sorry!" Andromeda panted, coming to a halt in front of the teens. "Took forever to deal with him. Had to speak rather loud to get him to understand what I was saying. But I know where we're staying now. C'mon, let's go get settled in. I need a drink."

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"I can't believe he did that!"

"I can."

"Well of course *YOU* can!"

Harry shrugged. "Anything to win." He said, grinning as he kicked his feet up onto a footstool.

"But he smashed right into the ground at who-knows-how-fast!" Tonks exclaimed, gesturing wildly.

"Indeed he did." Harry replied, nodding.

"Probably broke half the bones in his body!"

"Most likely."

"And that's *GOOD*?"

"Krum won Bulgaria the Cup, Nymmy. How he did it is completely irrelevant. He knew that he was way too low to pull out of that dive. But the other guy had spotted the snitch first, didn't he? Krum beat

him to it, that's all. Sure, he'll probably be stuck gulping down half a bottle of Skele-Grow or something, but he's gonna be a hero for months to come." Harry explained.

They had just gotten back in from watching the World Cup. Bulgaria had won it, 390-340. Because Viktor Krum, Bulgaria's star Seeker, had made a downright kamikaze move at the last minute, Ireland had suffered a crushing defeat. There had been dead silence in the massive stadium as Krum had hit the ground. He had been going so fast, it was a wonder there hadn't been *some* kind of shockwave thrown out at some point.

The match itself had gone on for nearly six hours. Harry, who had gone around the campgrounds with Tonks earlier in the day, had bought them both some Omnioculars to better keep tabs on things during the game. Tonks had had to lead Harry back to their tent by the shoulders, since the boy had spent most of his time watching a replay of the game's end.

"Fred and George are gonna be maaaaad." Tonks suddenly said.

"I told them that Krum would pull a win at any cost." Harry said. "They can't say I didn't warn them!"

"They don't know of your bizarre pseudo-prediction senses like I do." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "Anyway, I hope they pop in at some point. I wanna hear what they thought of it."

"Same here. If we don't see them before, we'll hunt 'em down on the train." Harry said. "That was definitely an awesome experience, though. I'll remember that my whole life. But by Merlin's bits, I'm tired."

"I'll drink to that." Tonks said. She hopped up and walked over to the tent's built-in fridge. "Want anything?"

"Cola. I need something sweet." Harry said. "Got a headache."

"Then you'd better catch, huh?" Tonks said.

Harry frowned and looked up to ask what she meant. He let out a highly undignified squawk, flattened himself back on the couch he was on, and shot a hand up to grab the rapidly flying can of soda before it clobbered him in the puss. After the catch, he just sort of froze in position, his brain trying to function properly.

"What in the twelve goblin hells was *that* for?" He finally sputtered.

"A test of your reflexes." Tonks said, looking amused. "I knew you'd catch it."

"Wasn't the can you should worry about me catching." Harry set, setting the drink down on a nearby table and getting to his feet. "You better hope you've got more energy than I do, woman."

"Oh no! The Boy Who Lived is going to chase me about! Whatever shall I do?" Tonks asked, throwing herself into a particularly silly pose and batting her eyelashes. "Settle down, Harry. Mum'll be back any time. Best not to let her see you chasing me around. Might give her the wrong impression!"

"Wrong impression?" Harry repeated. "...Oi. My head hurts."

"That's your brain trying to comprehend its own stupidity." Tonks replied flatly, walking over and sitting in a conveniently-placed - and very squishy - chair.

"You're asking for it, you know that, right?" Harry asked, sitting back down and grabbing his can of soda off the table. "If you knew what was good for you, you'd stobwwaaaahgh!"

Tonks dissolved into giggles, watching as Harry fought in vain to keep the *rest* of his can of soda from erupting onto his face. She knew he would catch the dumb thing. She was just banking on it getting shaken up enough between when she grabbed it and when Harry opened it.

"You realize I hate you." Harry muttered, getting up and walking into the bathroom to grab a towel.

"Ooh, I'm so scared." Tonks replied, giggling some more.

When Andromeda returned - she had been sidetracked by a friend she hadn't seen since her Hogwarts days en route back to the tent - it was to find her daughter and Harry curled up on the couch, reading a book. She wasn't entirely sure where they had *found* it - the tent certainly didn't come with anything fancy like a library - when there it was.

"We're fine, Harry's wearing a bathrobe because his shirt is covered in soda and he wasn't able to find another one, we bought the book earlier, and it's close to midnight." Tonks said, her voice quite dry. She hadn't bothered looking up from the book.

"...I need to change my questioning tactics." The older woman muttered, shaking her head slowly. "Right, so *why* was Harry's shirt covered in soda?"

"Wench threw a can at me and then distracted me so I wouldn't remember when I opened it." Harry muttered. He got a slug on the arm for calling Tonks such a name. "It's folded up in the bathroom. I figured it'd be best for me *not* to walk around shirtless. Unfortunately, the only decent thing I could find was this thing."

"I told him that he'd better *hope* nothing happens tonight." Tonks said, turning to her mother and grinning. "Else the papers would dub him Boy Who Bathed or something. The only person to save the day in a hideous, fuzzy, pink bathrobe. Found in a tent. At the Quidditch World Cup."

Harry snapped the book - a history of Ireland and Bulgaria's teams - shut, turning to glare at the girl next to him. "Go to sleep, Garfield."

"Oi! Don't call me Garfield."

"Then lose the tiger-striped hair." Harry said. "...And go to sleep, anyway."

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to unwind and you're still strangely hyper. Why IS that, anyway?"

Tonks shrugged. "Just still running off the excitement of the day, I suppose."

"You two can do what you want." Andromeda said, finally getting a chance to speak after watching the teens' back-and-forth. "I'm turning in, though. Don't be too loud, alright?"

"When're we heading out tomorrow?" Asked Harry.

"Oh, just whenever. The Ministry folks assigned to clean-up duty - poor saps - won't arrive until somewhere around the time school begins for you two." Andromeda said. "Though I expect to be out of here long before then."

"How are we going? I mean, is the Ministry providing more portkeys or something?" Tonks asked.

"The anti-apparition wards will come down in the morning." Andromeda said. "I'll just have you two side-along with me. You'll get a feel for what to expect when you take your apparition tests in a few years."

"What's it feel like?" Asked Harry.

"...Very unpleasant." Andromeda said after a moment of thought. "Kind of feels like you're being squished through a tiny tube."

Harry made a face. "And no one's tried *do* something about it? Find a better way of getting around?"

"What can I say, wizards are lazy at times. It works, it isn't *too* difficult, and it gets you to where you need to be in an instant." Andromeda said, stretching as she got up and made her way back towards where the bedrooms were. "Don't stay up too long, you lot."

"Yes, mum." Tonks said.

"Goodnight!" Harry called after her. Then, once they heard the door close, he turned to Tonks and asked, "She does realize this thing only has two bedrooms, doesn't she?"

"Don't think she has a clue." Tonks replied, shaking her head.

"Oh well. You take the bed, I'm fine right here." Harry said.

"What? No, no, you can come and share the thing with me - we'd both fit." Tonks said.

"Yeah, I'm sure we would. And if your mother sees us sleeping in the same bed?"

"...Right, probably wouldn't look good." Tonks said, scowling.

"Right. I mean, if we were out here and just sorta nodded off together, that's one thing." Harry said.

"Nice to see you have no objections with the actual act of falling asleep next to me." Tonks said, poking Harry in the arm a few times.

The boy sputtered briefly, turning red. "I... That isn't... Oh, shut up, Nymmy."

"Oi!"

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In the end, their argument about who would take the bed was resolved in the simplest way possible - a furious session of Rock, Paper, Scissors. Harry had, of course, won the game. Partly due to the fact that it wasn't the first time he had challenged Tonks to it, partly because he knew she always threw scissors first for some reason. One rock later and he was smirking victoriously.

Harry had drifted off thinking about what a *good* day it had been. The team he was cheering for won, the game itself was absolutely amazing - real Quidditch was a *lot* faster than what he was used to at school - and he had gotten to spend some quality time with Tonks. Certainly, the prospect of being curled up next to her was a nice one, but he knew better than that. They were starting to get a bit old for supposedly coincidental things like that to happen. He didn't reckon Andromeda would be very happy if he knew they had just up and turned in together.

And besides, the couch really was nice. It was very soft, yet firm in all the right places. And the pillows at the ends were puffy enough so that his head wasn't at an unnatural angle when he was resting.

"You've been pretty quiet today." Harry hissed softly.

"I'm worn out." Boris replied.

Harry chuckled. "Worn out? You've slept most of the day!"

"I was poking my head out of your collar to watch the game." Boris replied. *"If that is the game you've claimed to play at your school, you'd do full well to remember not to bring me along."*

"The games at Hogwarts run at a *much* slower pace. I dunno what brooms they were even on, but they were a good deal faster than my Firebolt. ...Wonder if they were test models or something..." Harry pondered aloud.

"Yes, well, be that as it may..." Boris hissed. *"Try and pawn me off to Tonks before you go out to play."*

"If she'll let you, I will. Just remember - you can't crawl around in her shirt like you can with mine. You'll have to pick her arm or her neck and keep there." Harry said, in a tone that distinctly felt as though he were a father addressing his son.

"Who do you think you're talking down to? I'll have you know..." Boris began, sounding irritated.

"I know, I know. Lighten up." Harry said, grinning. "You really have seemed tense today."

"I've been feeling something strange for the past few hours." Boris replied.

"Strange how?"

"Not sure. Perhaps it's simply the energy of all of these wizards and witches in one place. I AM unaccustomed to being around so many people." Boris stated.

"Well, Hogwarts isn't nearly this packed, so no worries there." Harry said. "Still... I'm not one to take a possible warning lightly. You don't think something bad is gonna happen, do you?"

"I think--" Boris began. But before he could finish hissing his reply, a horrible, loud shriek filled the quiet night, causing Harry to bolt upright.

Andromeda and Tonks were out of their bedrooms quickly, having also been jolted awake by the scream. "What's going on?" Asked the younger of the two.

"Not sure." Harry said, getting to his feet. "Was talking to Boris and then someone screamed."

"You two stay here." Andromeda said, fixing them with a serious stare for a few seconds apiece before she made her way out of the tent. The two teens waited for her return in tense silence. When she finally popped back in, she didn't look well at all.

"I'm warding this place up to keep you in." She said quickly.

"Wait! What's going on?" Asked Harry and Tonks at almost the same time.

"Don't have a damn clue. But the Dark Mark is flying and there are creatures loose all over the place! Stay in and don't move until I get back!" Andromeda said, leaving the tent once more.

"Does she know who she's dealing with?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Apparently not." Tonks said. "Got your wand?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Of course."

"Good."

"*You don't think you should actually stay put?*" Asked Boris.

"Are you kidding?" Harry responded. "I've killed an already dead guy twice, fought a snake that makes you look punier than usual, and

managed to fight off a platoon of soul-sucking shadow things. Whatever's out there, I'm sure I can handle!"

"*Not the POINT!*" Boris exclaimed as Harry and Tonks poked their heads out of the tent.

The scene wasn't anything like what they were expecting. Andromeda must have done something to drown out the noise, because it was a regular horror show outside. People, the ones still capable of doing so, anyway, were screaming all over the place. Just a few tents away, what looked like an ogre was using some poor man as a weapon, smashing him into what could only be his family. A few tents past that, a few werewolves were busy tearing another man limb from limb.

"Shit." Harry swore in little more than a whisper. "I hate being right all the damn time."

"My mum's out there!" Tonks squeaked, her voice quite high pitched.

"The Weasleys are out there, too." Harry said, his own voice full of worry. "My plans didn't include werewolves. Or ogres."

"You said 'creatures,' dammit!" Tonks hissed.

"Yeah, well, I obviously wasn't thinking of things so damn hard to take down!" Harry hissed in reply. "Do you have any idea what ogre skin is *like?*"

"Of course I do! I've read that stupid monster book you love so much about a dozen times!" Tonks exclaimed.

"Okay, so... new plan..." Harry said, his eyes trying to take in the battlefield around him. "Observing the situation: Dark creatures everywhere, killing as they see fit. If the Dark Mark is in the sky, that must mean some of Voldemort's old cronies are either here or were just around to let loose the creatures attacking everyone.

"Not sure how many are out there, but it can't be as many as the amount of wizards that are here, so we have some kind of safety there, morbid as saying that might be. The anti-apparition wards

aren't down yet, so we can't just find your mother and be free. We need to at least try and hunt the Weasleys down, too. Dammit, I didn't plan for needing a mass evacuation, either... too many flaws in my bloody self-proclaimed brilliant scheme..."

"Berate yourself later!" Tonks said, pulling Harry out of the tent. "We've gotta find mum!"

"Chances are, she went to check on her friend. That's what I'd do if I were her. Do you remember where she said it was? I was busy rewatching Krum hit the ground." Harry said.

"Over near where the Ireland supporters are!" Tonks said, grabbing Harry by the hand. "I remember where that is, too! Remember where we saw that old guy, talking about his bits needing air!"

"Oh god, don't remind me!" Harry groaned. "Get your wand out, Nymmy, we may need to do some fighting!"

"The Ministry will have our butts for it!"

"The Ministry will have more to worry about than us performing magic in a life or death situation!" Harry said, drawing his own. "Damn! **MOVE!**"

Harry tugged back sharply on Tonks' hand, causing her to let out a shrill cry of pain as her shoulder popped. Better a slightly dislocated shoulder than what would have happened if she hadn't been pulled out of the way, though. A huge chunk of stadium had crash landed not far in front of the two. Several other wizards and witches trying to get out of the way hadn't been so lucky.

"They're attacking the damn stadium! What the hell could be so powerful to throw a chunk of it *that* big?" Harry asked, staring in horror.

"Giants." Tonks whispered, shaking Harry and pointing.

"**What?**" He replied, turning to look. Sure enough, two utterly huge creatures were just visible near where the stadium was located. Apparently, some of the magical community present had tried taking

the high ground, like Harry's plan had wanted to do. Harry's plan, sadly, had not accounted for what to do if something picked *UP* the high ground and flung it across all creation.

"Tonks, maybe you should go back to the tent." Harry started, turning to look at the injured girl. "I don't want anything to hurt you. If your mum warded the thing, I'd bet it's safe. It can't be worse than it is out here, and... Tonks? Tonks! Are you listening? Tonks, what...?"

Tonks was not listening. In fact, she seemed very intent on staring at something just over Harry's shoulder. It took a moment, but Harry realized this. A cold chill ran down his spine. He knew he should look, and that he should do it quickly. But there was still a part of him screaming out that if he didn't look and didn't see it, it might not really be there.

"M...mi..." Tonks tried saying, her voice barely audible.

'Oh god, don't let it be that...' Harry thought, his heart rate increasing as he slowly turned around, looking over his shoulder the whole way. He sucked in a fierce breath through his teeth when he caught sight of what was making Tonks so spooked.

A minotaur, no less than ten feet tall, and carrying monstrous axes in each hand, was stomping ever closer. Though plenty of other witches and wizards were running around it - some of whom even tried toppling the creature with spells as they passed by - it seemed intent on coming straight for them. Boris was hissing wildly from his left arm, but he couldn't focus on anything the snake was saying. His brain had been thrown into overdrive, trying to work out how he was going to deal with something that seemed like it would take no greater joy than to cleave him in half.

Wracking his brain, he finally decided to go down the only road he saw open to him. Quickly turning back to Tonks, he cried out, "*RUN!*"

He had barely started to run, however, when one of Boris' wild hisses caught him. He spun around and immediately felt as though he had been punched right in the stomach. Tonks, apparently having been too stunned at such a menacing beast coming for her, hadn't started

to run when he had. And he, in his panicked state of mind, hadn't thought to look beside him.

Harry clutched his wand tightly and broke in a dead run back the way he came. The minotaur had dropped one of its large axes. After all, it had something new to hold now.

Chapter 6 – Grab the Sky

As he ran, Harry noticed a number of things. His senses seemed to be heightened, if only for that one moment in time. There had been a surge of magical energy from the sky the moment he had bolted back towards Tonks. Then a series of cracking noises sounded all over the place, as if someone had set off fireworks. Moments later, a second series of cracking noises filled the air.

The anti-apparition wards going down, the Aurors arriving, and those uninjured fleeing.

Unfortunately, Harry wasn't able to gauge just how *many* Aurors had arrived. He had a bad feeling that the giants alone were gonna pose a problem. The good part there was that the giants were still dismantling the stadium. The Aurors needed to drop the smaller creatures first.

"*Spiral!*" Hissed Boris suddenly, about the time that Harry got within swinging range of the minotaur's axe.

As he threw himself to one side to avoid being cleaved, Harry hissed back, "*Spiral?*"

"*With a jab at the center!*" Replied the snake.

"Spell?"

"Yes."

"What's it do?"

Boris' reply was lost as Tonks let out a scream. The minotaur's grip on her had tightened.

"What's it *DO?*" Harry yelled, trying to figure out what to do. If he tried to attack, the damned monster might crush Tonks. But he couldn't just sit around dodging all night! He let out a frustrated yell. "*TELUM CONICIO!*"

A large bolt flew out of the tip of Harry's wand and into the minotaur's left eye.

The creature let out an unearthly wail, dropping its remaining axe and bringing a hand to its eye, pawing at the sizzling bolt. Tonks was squirming around wildly in its other hand, which had loosened somewhat. "Harry! Help me!"

Boris started hissing quickly, making sure he was heard this time. Harry paused in the snake's instructions and cried out, "I can't do something like that! What if it misses? I've never even *attempted* something like that before!"

"You can and you will or she's going to die." Hissed the snake. *"I don't think you have any other options, unless you wish to try throwing jelly-legs jinxes at it and hope it trips to death."*

"We're gonna have a long talk later, Boris!" Harry growled, dashing at the minotaur again. As he approached, he concentrated on what Boris had told him. Arm back, spiral motion with a sharp jab at the center, fueled by hatred, strengthened by desire...

"INVIDIA EXIMO!" He roared, shoving his wand's tip into the center of the minotaur's chest.

For the briefest of moments, absolutely nothing happened. There was a short clicking sound followed by an incredibly loud howl as the spell activated. Harry was shot through the air backwards by the kick of the thing, smashing into a tree and collapsing to the ground.

At the same time, a massive spray of blood was erupting from the minotaur's torso, both in front and in back. The spell had blasted a gaping hole in the beast's upper body and had created spiderweb trails of deep cuts in all directions from the impact site out.

Tonks, half coated in minotaur blood, managed to pry herself free from the creature's grasp before its legs buckled and it toppled over backwards. As soon as she hit the ground, she took off running towards Harry, sliding on the ground when she got near him. "Harry! **HARRY!**"

"*He's fine...*" Hissed Boris quietly, knowing full well the girl wouldn't be able to understand. "*He's fine.*"

But Tonks wasn't paying attention to the weak attempts at comfort the snake was giving. There was a large pool of blood forming under Harry's head, coming from around his left temple, which had struck the tree the hardest. She didn't want to shake him to try waking him up, in case there were more serious injuries, but she also wasn't thinking too clearly.

Boris watched from around Harry's neck. As the sounds of Aurors killing Dark creatures filled the air, and as more apparated in to increase their ranks, Tonks' energy finally gave way. She slumped over against the tree, one of her hands still tightly clutching one of Harry's.

"*He's fine.*" Hissed the snake once more. "*For now.*"

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Harry sighed. He knew this place. He had been here a couple of times before. Oh, it was never for very long, but the fact remained - he knew this place. He had worked out that he arrived there whenever he had been seriously injured and was out like a light in the real world.

He didn't have a name for the place and, as far as he knew, it had no name to give him. It changed in different ways every time he appeared, which he still didn't quite understand. But, for all he knew, it was simply his addled brain trying to jumpstart itself again or something. He hadn't done any research into the matter.

This time, the large, open field had an equally large lake at the center of it. More trees had sprung up since the last time Harry had been here. Strangely, the branches on them had started to twist into unnatural positions. That was different. Before, the trees may as well have been painted onto the scenery. The trunks were tall and straight, as were the branches.

"Must mean I really screwed myself up this time." Harry said aloud to himself.

He walked over to the lake, gazing into its crystal clear waters. "Wish I could remember what I *did* this time, though."

Sitting down, Harry looked around once more. A small series of hills had popped up in the distance. With a mirthless laugh, Harry wondered if they would eventually turn into mountains if he managed to hurt himself enough. He was in no hurry to make return visits to the place, so he hoped never to find out.

"I hope Tonks is okay." He said, sighing once more. "Damn, but it's boring here..."

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Tonks sighed. She hated being stuck in bed. Though her mother had gotten her (and Harry) to a healer as soon as she had found them, Tonks was still being forced to remain in bed for a few days. Just in case.

Harry was in his room. He hadn't awakened yet. The healer had said that he had taken a nasty jolt to the head when he connected with the tree, but that he should be alright. It was only a matter of time until he opened his eyes. The healer had been more worried at the drastic magical fatigue he had suffered. Tonks had tried to remember exactly what had happened, but she had been too panicked to notice what Harry had done.

Tonks had never before wished that she could be a Parselmouth. Boris had been awake and most likely knew everything that had taken place. And she couldn't ask him a damn thing. This, above all else, was frustrating to her.

She had been kept on an almost constant series of potions, to keep her relaxed and to heal some of the bones that had been fractured. Nothing had been broken, but her ribs still ached something fierce. It was a good thing she had no reason to laugh, otherwise she would have been in trouble.

Solieyu was now staying at Number Nine. He had floored over as soon as he could, after Andromeda owled him back. He had written after seeing the Prophet's article on the attack at the World Cup and

was worried, knowing that the Tonks women and Harry were attending.

"That snake is impossible to deal with." Muttered Solieyu, walking into Tonks' room and shaking his head. "Wouldn't let me near him."

"Boris just doesn't know you yet." Tonks said, shrugging. "I guess. I'm not happy with the little jerk at the moment, either. Any changes?"

"Not that I saw, though he was shifting around a little. He'll probably be awake in time for supper." Replied the boy, leaning back against a dresser.

"Hope so. Maybe then I can stop being bedridden." Tonks mumbled. "Mum's refused to lemme see the Prophet reports of the attack, which is stupid."

"I can tell you what I've read, if you'd like."

"Mainly, I'm wondering who started the attacks and how the Aurors took care of the giants..." Said the girl.

"The Prophet waffled about the former." Solieyu said. "Oh, there were speculations that Voldemort's old followers were still around, given that the Dark Mark had been put in the sky, sure. But the Prophet also pondered if it hadn't been some stupid anti-Quidditch group trying to make a point or something."

"Worthless reporting. Nothing new there." Tonks said, dryly. "And the giants?"

"There was enough of the stadium left that the Aurors toppled it over onto them. Attacked the heads after that. The articles all said that it was a rather gruesome sight once it was all said and done, and I don't doubt that. Giants are a whole other league of strong. Nice to know that the Aurors are capable enough to win with minimal casualties, though."

"Yeah." Tonks agreed. "I'm sure Harry's not going to think that way, though. He'll be pissed that they weren't there from the start, I'm sure. They could've saved more people that way, maybe... but they would

have *also* been caught offguard by the attack at first. It was a lose-lose situation, really."

"Gotten any mail from the twins?" Asked Solieyu.

"A fairly long one." Tonks said, nodding. "They're all okay, though Ron and Ginny got pretty scratched up. They said that Ron had gotten his wand stolen at some point and was actually accused of being the one to fire the Dark Mark."

"Say what?"

"Yeah! Apparently some knobbly little house elf took it or something. Didn't think that house elves could use wands." Tonks said.

"They shouldn't be able to..." Solieyu replied, frowning. "...Anything else?"

"Oh, not too much, really. Hermione was there - she's hanging out with Ginny again this summer and went along to the Cup with them. Twins say she's been a monster since the deal with the house elf, raving about their rights or something."

"I'd hate to be over there right now." Solieyu said, chuckling.

"Agreed. Oh! They did say Ron almost launched himself off the area they were sitting when those veela took the field during the game! I woulda paid good money to have seen that!" Tonks said, grinning.

Solieyu rolled his eyes.

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Something wasn't right.

Harry got to his feet and looked around. Nothing about the landscape had changed, but it still felt as if something was different. He frowned, looking up. Only then did he notice that some of the trees had become more gnarled. Branches twisted around in unnatural spirals, the trunks cracked and misshapen.

"The hell...?"

Harry walked over to the nearest tree, glancing at all of the others around him. Only a few had made the change so far. Placing his hand against the trunk's bark, he frowned again. The tree felt almost like plastic to him. There was a strange smoothness to it, despite looking like any other tree. Walking around, he checked a few more of the trees that had been twisted further. All of them felt the same.

"Something definitely isn't right." He said, running a hand back through his hair. "Damn it, I wish I'd wake up already..."

Figuring he had nothing better to do, Harry decided to check out one of the trees that hadn't yet been twisted up. But, to further his confusion, these still felt like normal trees. He had even cut his finger on the first one he checked, assuming it would be smooth like the others. After hissing and sucking on the injured fingertip for a second, he pulled back and gave the tree a good, firm kick.

A chain burst from a knothole in the trunk, wrapping around Harry's right leg. Before he could register what had just happened, however, several more shot out. Soon, he had been hefted into the air, his arms and legs all surrounded by the chains. He struggled to free himself, but it was no use - they just grew tighter.

"Let me go, dammit!" He yelled.

"Stop destroying this sacred place." Came a deep, booming voice from nowhere.

Harry blinked. In all his trips to this place, there had never been anyone else around. After a minute, realizing the voice wasn't going to continue, Harry asked, "What do you mean? I haven't done anything to this place!"

"You are the reason it is becoming warped." Replied the voice.

"What? Make sense, damn it! Who are you? For that matter, *WHERE* are you? And what do you care if the trees get all gnarled?"

Harry received no reply. In fact, the world around him was starting to dissolve into a white haze. "No! No, I can't wake up now!" He cried, thrashing about in the chains. "Damn it!"

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"*You're awake.*"

"Very astute, Boris." Harry replied, scowling.

"*Chipper, aren't we?*"

"Hasn't been a good week." Harry said, sitting up. He groaned quietly as he did so, the whole of his right side aching terribly. "Jeez, what happened? Last thing I remember is that minotaur grabbing Tonks and then..."

He paused, turning to stare down at the mini taipan, who was on the pillow next to him. "...And then *you* told me to use whatever the hell knocked me out! You've got some explaining to do. Why did you know about it? What the hell was it?"

"*Settle down, boy.*" Hissed the snake, a sigh in his voice. "*I can tell you what you want... but it would be better for us both if I didn't.*"

"Meaning?"

"*Meaning that I screwed up, Harry. I should have never told you about that spell. I'm still unsure why I did. Perhaps it was the panic you were feeling. Perhaps I feared for my own life. And perhaps I saw something else there... something deeper. Darker.*"

"Darker?"

"*Darker. But to get into that is to get into my past - something I'm not comfortable telling someone your age.*" Boris said.

"Someone my age?" Harry repeated. "Should I remind you of all the crap I've been through in the last few years alone?"

"What you've done and what my former master did are two entirely different things!" Hissed Boris in what could only be described as a savage manner. "He did things most wizards, especially wizards your age, should never hear about! Think about what that spell did to that minotaur. I know you were conscious long enough to ensure Tonks' safety. Think about what you did to it! Now envision and realize that that spell was created to use on other humans. Slaves, to be precise. Slaves who did not follow their masters' commands. What kind of carnage do you think something like that would have on mere flesh?"

Harry sat in silence for a few minutes before he replied. "What was it?"

"Invidia Eximo is a spell bound to hatred and fueled by anger. The desire to kill. It unleashes all of these things, in an outward spiral, at the point of impact on the target. The movement mimics a sort of whirlpool, only in reverse. I have seen many natural disasters in my life, as had my former master. He was inspired by tornados and hurricanes. The swirling motion and the devastation left in their wake. He wanted to harness that fury. If you had used that spell on a human, there would be very little left. And it wasn't the most deadly thing he created."

"What? Look, I've studied a lot of dark magic - supposed dark magic, I should say - and I've seen a good number of spells. A good portion animated. I know what can be done to a human's body, Boris." Harry said.

"Do you really?" Asked the snake. "No. I don't think you quite do. While my former master was a dreadfully powerful man, he was also always trying to further his own position in the public's eye. He tried - and succeeded on numerous occasions - to make spells that also benefitted your race. Of course, he only did so for his own purposes, but the fact remains that he didn't simply create a handful of death-bringing spells."

"How many of his spells do you remember?"

"Too many. And more than you'll ever be told of, I assure you." Hissed Boris. *"The fact that you know of the Invidia Eximo is damage*

enough. You must promise me, Harry - promise that you will never use that spell on anything human."

"I figured you'd ask." Harry said. "And I agree, on one condition: if someone's life - be it my own or someone else's - is in danger..."

"Only if you see no other alternatives."

"It will be a last resort and nothing more." Harry said, nodding.

"Very well."

"I won't press you for more information on your old master. But I would like to hear of the spells he made. Of course, I doubt you would ever tell me of the more dangerous ones, but if he truly did make useful spells..." Harry started, grinning crookedly.

"We will see." Said Boris. "We will see. Now... would you care to hear about what's happened since you blacked out?"

"I wouldn't mind hearing." Harry said.

"First, Tonks is fine. A few crushed ribs, but that's about it. You did good. Someone else arrived recently. Smell was odd on that one..."

"Someone else? ...Well, it's probably Leon then. He's a vampire, so I guess he would smell a bit different to you." Harry said, thinking for a moment.

"Ahh. Yes, that would explain it. It's been ages since I was around a vampire..." Boris said.

"You've been around vampires before?" Asked Harry, raising an eyebrow. "Yeah, you're definitely telling me about your past sometime."

"Yes, yes, some other day. When you're older. Anyway, Tonks is just fine. You, on the other hand, ended up laying in a pool of your own blood."

"Know any spells to keep me from kicking my own butt?" Harry asked, rubbing the back of his neck. "Head still hurts..."

"I'd imagine so. You must have quite a thick skull to have not suffered anything serious. Not with the way you bounced." Boris said.

"How long have I been out?"

"Long enough. Had you been out another day, you would not be attending school." Boris said.

"Dammit."

"Go talk to your girlfriend." Boris finally said. *"According to this Leon person, she's been going stir-crazy. I didn't know who your friend was, so I hovered over you and kept him away. If you see him, apologize for me."*

"Not my girlfriend." Harry muttered, making a face as he got to his feet. He wobbled slightly. "Urf... not got my land legs back yet..."

Harry eventually got dressed - he wanted to shower, too, as he was feeling a bit on the haggard side - and headed for the door. "Want to come along?"

"No thank you. I believe I'll enjoy some uninterrupted sleep, if it's all the same." Hissed Boris.

"Alright. I'll make sure no one wanders in, then. Night, Boris."

Harry crept down the hall and peeked into Tonks' room. She was sitting up in bed, talking to Solieyu about the Quidditch match at the Cup. The vampire's eyes darted quickly from Tonks to Harry and then back again. Harry figured his friend surely had picked up on the fact that he was approaching.

Harry tiptoed into the room and over to the bed. Since Tonks was looking the other way, she didn't notice him until he leaned in and whispered, "Morning, Nymmy."

Tonks shrieked and toppled over to one side. Harry blinked, staring down at her for a moment before cracking up. Tonks glared at Harry, then turned to Solieyu and yelled, "You **KNEW** he was coming, didn't you?"

"Guilty." Replied Solieyu, smiling slightly.

"Ooh! *Boys!*" Tonks fumed, sitting back up. "...Good to see you up and about, Harry. How do you feel?"

"Now there's a mood change." Harry said. "I'm a bit wobbly, but otherwise fine. You?"

"Chest hurts still." Tonks said, frowning. "Tried not moving around too much, but it hurts a little when I breathe, so I figure it wasn't working out too well."

"Well, we certainly had a fun outing, didn't we?" Harry asked, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Hey, Leon. When'd you get here?"

"Not long ago." Replied the boy. "After I saw the article printed in the Prophet, I asked her mother if I could come over."

"Ahh. What're those idiots reporting saying about the event?" Harry asked.

Solieyu launched into another recap of the newspaper's reportings. As he spoke, Harry scowled. A scowl that only got more pronounced as the vampire went along.

"Honestly, are all their reporters blind *and* stupid?" Harry asked, once Solieyu had finished.

"Could be." Tonks said. "Oi, Leon, would you do me a favor? Go call mum at work and tell her Harry's awake and feeling okay?"

Solieyu nodded. "I'm going to get something to drink while I'm down there. Either of you want anything?"

"Ice water." Harry said. "Throat's sore."

Nodding again, Solieyu left the room. Harry turned to Tonks and grinned. "Your own personal manservant? I hope you haven't been asking him to do everything for you, Nymmy."

"Don't call me Nymmy, you blockhead." Tonks grumbled.

"Blockhead? You sure you didn't hit your head too?" Harry asked, quickly dodging a swat from Tonks.

"Oh, hush." She said, sticking her tongue out. "And no, I haven't been running Leon ragged. You should be thankful - he's kept an eye on you. Which has helped *me* recover since I haven't been spazzing out about wanting to keep awake twenty-four-seven to keep an eye on you."

"Yes, yes, I'll thank him later for that. Are you *really* okay?"

"Like I said, I'm just kinda sore." Tonks said. "You?"

"I've had a long talk with my snake about that spell." Harry muttered darkly. "Still not feeling back to normal, but I'll get by. How long until school, anyway?"

"Day after tomorrow." Tonks said.

"Cutting it close this year." Harry said, sighing. "I'm glad you're alright. I kind of freaked out when I saw that that thing had ahold of you."

"I noticed. What the hell spell *was* that?"

"You'd rather not know. I'd get a lecture from you *and* your mum. In short, it was just a really destructive spell fueled by negative emotions, though." Harry said, shrugging.

"And you managed to pull it off in one try?"

"I'm the hero, remember?"

"And that lets you make the impossible possible?"

"Usually." Harry said, chuckling. "I don't see you complaining. Sorry I didn't get there sooner, though. I feel really awful about not checking to make sure you took off running with me..."

"Hush." Tonks said, putting a finger over Harry's mouth to silence him. "I'm alright, you saved the day, and we both made it out more or less intact."

Harry smiled, kissing Tonks' finger to get her to move it. Once she had (blushing, Harry noted) he sighed and shook his head. "We made it out... did the Prophet say how many didn't?"

"Over a hundred." Tonks said, her voice quiet. "But given how many were there, and the nature of the attack..."

"Yeah... I didn't think the Aurors would be on their best. Guess I shouldn't just blindly hate them. Isn't their fault the Ministry's run by an idiot like Fudge. I guess their department had some kind of watch going or something. They had to have some way of knowing."

"Yeah... But why did it take them as long as it did to arrive?" Asked Tonks.

"They probably only had one guy on watch, and then he had to gather a group large enough to pose a threat." Harry said. "Just a guess, though."

"Hope Hogsmeade trips aren't cancelled because of this." Tonks said. "I mean, I know that sounds petty and all, but..."

"We shouldn't be intimidated by some of Voldemort's robe-kissers?"

"Yeah."

"I agree whole-heartedly." Harry said.

"Your water." Solieyu said, pressing the cold glass up against the back of Harry's head, causing him to let out an odd squawk.

"Dammit! Don't sneak up on me!" Harry exclaimed, taking the water and scowling.

"I wasn't sneaking at all. Tonks, your mother says she'll be home in about an hour." Said Solieyu, walking over to a chair and sitting. "Now then... are we ever going to have a normal year?"

"Good question." Harry said, taking a long drink and wincing slightly as it went down. "What happened to you, anyway?"

"Hm?"

"You look a bit off, Leon." Harry said.

Solieyu glanced down at himself, frowning slightly. "Do I?"

"You're taller. And a good deal thinner." Harry said. "I'm assuming it's just part of your curse, but... it's still weird to see."

"Ah, yes. Mostly it's because I just don't eat." Solieyu said. "My body will probably end up looking not unlike a corpse's by the time we get out of Hogwarts. Third World thin and very tall. My face hasn't started going gaunt, something I'm thankful for. It doesn't happen to everyone, and I'm hoping I luck out."

"I co-sign." Tonks said. "By the way, I was meaning to ask - what's with the charm?"

"Charm?"

"Yeah. It's really faint, but it's there. It's like I want to be drawn towards you."

"Oh, damn it all..." Solieyu swore. "It's another blasted vampiric side effect. You two were at the Cup - the Prophet said there were veela there."

"Yup." Harry said.

"Harry wasn't phased by them! I was so impressed..." Tonks said, grinning over at the boy. "Especially since half the men in the stadium were trying to fling themselves onto the pitch."

"Good times were had by all, then?" Solieyu asked. "Anyway, it's sort of like that, only in reverse. I was hoping I'd be able to suppress it, but if you're still picking up on it..."

"Afraid so." Tonks said. "So what, does this mean half the girls in school are gonna try and drag you into a broom closet for snogs?"

"Oh god..." Solieyu said, shaking his head.

"Take some of *my* fangirls." Harry said. "I don't want 'em!"

"I don't want them either!" Solieyu said. "Harry, when we get back to Hogwarts, can I study the Marauder's Map? I want to memorize all the shortcuts and hidden passages as best I can."

"Escape routes?"

"Escape routes."

Harry chuckled. "Sure thing. And I wish you the best of luck. Just know that if your magic voodoo lures Tonks away from me, I'll have to drive a wooden stake through your crotch!"

"Um... Harry? Vampires are killed by a stake through the *heart*." Tonks said.

"I know." Harry replied, grinning.

"You'd only make me angry. That's a myth." Solieyu said, raising an eyebrow. "Though I think a stake in the crotch would slow down *any* male vampire."

"What if I used the Bolt Thrower? That'd be even worse!"

Solieyu hissed. "Can we *please* get off of this subject? It's making me... hurt..."

"Okay... The next point of business - something big's apparently happening at Hogwarts this year. I don't like surprises." Harry said.

"Yeah, what's Dumbledore playing at?" Asked Tonks. "After the mess at the Cup, he still wants to hold some big event? He's mad!"

"Well, Dumbledore's probably capable of defending Hogwarts on his own from a good variety of attacks, but yes, I do think it's a bad idea." Solieyu said, crossing his legs and frowning. "I wonder what it could be..."

"Knowing him? It'll involve half of wizarding Britain and will scream 'sabotage me!'" Harry mumbled, rubbing at his temples gingerly. One of them was *really* aching. He put it off to that tree he plowed into.

"Probably." Tonks said. "So what are our plans?"

"Avoid it at all costs if at all possible." Harry said. "...Which means I've just jinxed it and I'm gonna be at the center of things. Again."

"Don't jump to conclusions." Solieyu said. "Let's not worry too much yet. We'll have plenty of time for that when we're *at* Hogwarts."

"Okay, then onto the next point." Harry began. "A new place to call our hideout. The Nest has gotten a bit small. It's time for the ravens to find a new home."

"Think the Map could help us out there?" Asked Tonks.

"Probably. I'll wander around for awhile the first week back, see what I can find." Harry said.

The trio were quiet then, each pondering different things about the upcoming year. Harry just couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen. Worse than the previous years. The attack on the Quidditch World Cup felt like some kind of omen to him. If the Death Eaters really had been involved, then it set even less well with Harry.

As the side of his head let out a particularly sharp jab of pain, he thought back to what he had seen of the Invidia Eximo's damage. He had blacked out the moment Tonks had gotten free, but it had been enough. Despite his thoughts that magic neither fell into supposed light or dark categories, Harry couldn't readily think of a good reason to use such force on another human. The fact that Boris had claimed that it wasn't even the worst thing his former master had concocted

didn't set well with him, either. What could be worse than getting mutilated like that?

What bothered Harry more than that was that he was genuinely interested in knowing the answer. He craved knowledge about the magical world, especially the rarer aspects of it, but did he really want to have the knowledge Boris held? Did he really want to have access to something that devastating?

If Tonks was in danger again, and he had no other choice, he knew what he would do. He knew he would have to live with what he had done, as well. But if it came down to Tonks living or dying, he knew the answer. He would kill to keep her safe, certainly. He would kill to keep anyone he knew and cared about safe. He had killed in the past, though those were certainly a different type of killing, he supposed. A memory, a basilisk, and a man who was as good as dead anyway. And it was Quirrell's own fault, anyway. Harry hadn't even been able to control *that*.

And now a minotaur was added to the list of things that had died because of him.

Whatever Boris was hiding, he would find out. One way or another.

Chapter 7 – Ouroboros

"All underaged magic was ignored because of the attack?"

Harry leaned over in his chair at the table, trying to get a look at the latest edition of the Prophet. Andromeda had been reading through it that morning and, when asked why Harry hadn't gotten any warnings from the Ministry for using his wand, had replied that the Ministry was overlooking all spells used. It had been a life or death situation and, in the face of dozens of legal woes from the friends and families of those injured or killed, the Ministry felt it best to let anything else slide.

"I don't get why it'd matter who used magic." Tonks said. "I mean, it was pretty much only wizards there, right?"

"There *were* muggles there, Nymmy." Andromeda said, turning a page in the paper. "Not many, and I still don't quite get why we had to *have* them there. It was a pretty feeble cover story, if you ask me."

"We're really cutting it close this year." Harry said, sighing. "Diagon Alley today, Hogwarts tomorrow. I hope the Alley won't be too crowded with last-minute shoppers."

"Diagon Alley's under Auror watch." Andromeda said, folding the Prophet and setting it on the edge of the table. As she reached for a slice of toast, she added, "Has been since the attack. Ministry feels that being paranoid is better than not being there at all."

"So, folks..." Solieyu said, glancing up from his cup of coffee. "What kind of fraud, dark wizard, or dark creature will be put into the Defense position this year?"

"Hey, don't knock on Professor Lupin!" Tonks said around a mouth of egg.

"I'm a dark creature too, you know." Solieyu replied, smiling faintly.

"Oh yeah." Tonks said, blinking. "Kinda forget every so often."

"I don't even want to think about it." Harry chimed in. "I'm too hung up on what's going to take place to worry about the Defense professor."

I've handled them for two and a half years now. One more won't be a problem."

"Two and a half?" Asked Solieyu.

"Yeah. Well, Lupin was only a problem in the last bit of the year, wasn't he?" Harry replied, trying to coax Boris out of his shirt sleeve.

"True." Said Solieyu, taking a sip of his drink. "I say we spend as much time as we can in the common room until whatever-it-is gets announced."

"Too boring." Harry said. Then, switching to Parseltongue, he growled, "*Boris, if you don't get out of there and eat something, you're gonna be in trouble!*"

"*I'm not hungry!*" Replied the snake.

"*You have to be hungry!*" Harry hissed back. "*You haven't eaten since that one rat!*"

"*I can surely survive until we reach this school of yours.*" Boris said.

"*It's gonna be a bit harder finding proper meals for you. And unless you've forgotten, there are a lot of owls flying all about.*" Harry said.

"...*Fine.*" Replied the snake at last, slinking his way out and onto the table.

"Must you do that HERE?" Tonks asked, frowning as Harry set a dead rat in front of the taipan.

"He's gotta eat too." Harry said.

"Not the POINT." Tonks muttered, looking away.

"Harry, I think you should leave him here while we go to Diagon Alley." Andromeda said, watching as Boris started on the rat. "I don't think he'd appreciate a trip while full."

"Yeah. I'll let him digest on the table for awhile. I don't think he's gonna be up to moving afterwards." Harry agreed.

"Since the Aurors are lingering about," Andromeda began, getting up from the table and taking the dishes to the sink. "Let's not dally about once we're there. I've got a list of things you'll need, and I've already gotten a route planned."

"Frog marching us through our supply buying? Why even take us?" Tonks mumbled, crossing her arms.

"I heard that." Said the girl's mother. "You'll have a bit of time to go anywhere else you'd like. I'm just saying that you shouldn't loiter around and take too much time anywhere. Fudge has made half the Aurors jumpy. I saw McGuffin blast a hole in a wall the other day because he thought a paper airplane was something flying at his head."

"Is there anyone competent at the Ministry?" Harry wondered aloud. Then, realizing what he had said, quickly added, "Present company excluded, of course."

Andromeda chuckled. "Of course. And no, I'm sad to say that there are very few intelligent people working at the Ministry these days. Fudge is the reason, of course. He'd wilt in a light breeze. It's hard to have a strong team when the leader isn't worth his salt. But still, a few good people are hanging onto hope. Myself, Arthur Weasley, Crouch... well, not so much Crouch. He's been in a mood ever since the World Cup."

"Wasn't it *his* House Elf they accused of throwing the Dark Mark up?" Asked Tonks.

"Heard about that, huh?"

"Fred and George told us. Ron's wand was used, apparently. Ron was probably too busy trying to fling himself at a veela to notice." Harry said.

Andromeda nodded. "Yes, it was his elf. Sacked her on the spot and has been in a foul mood ever since. No one's dared to attempt to talk to him. Crouch was never very approachable before, mind, but these days..."

"I wonder why a House Elf would do something like that..." Solieyu pondered aloud.

"The twins told us she spent most of the time all curled up. Afraid of heights." Harry said. "Dunno why Crouch made her stay up there. He didn't even ever show up. Anyway, I don't want to put too much thought into it. The school year hasn't even started yet and I'm going to have enough to worry about. I don't wanna try and solve a mystery at this point."

"Agreed!" Tonks exclaimed, getting out of her chair and stretching. "Gonna go up and change."

"We'd better too." Harry said, nodding over at Solieyu.

"Yes, you'd better." Andromeda said. "You've got about five minutes before we Floo over."

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"I just know that when I learn to apparate, I'm going to land inverted somehow." Harry groaned, getting to his feet and dusting himself off.

Tonks was too busy giggling herself into a coma to reply, but Solieyu gave him a comforting pat on the back. Andromeda just chuckled and said, "It *will* get easier with time. You've only travelled this way a handful of times, Harry."

"Be that as it may," Began Harry, scowling, "I'm getting a bit tired of plowing into the ground every time we go somewhere."

"Okay, guys - I'm going to give you your time first. That way we won't scatter when we're carrying a bunch of stuff. After we leave Gringotts, you three go buy anything you want to grab, then meet back up with me outside the bank. Got it?" Andromeda said, leading the teens out of the Leaky Cauldron (waving a thanks to Tom as she did so) and into Diagon Alley.

"Aye aye, ma'am!" Tonks said, saluting her mother.

Harry snorted.

"If I were younger, I would bop the both of you." Andromeda said.
"But as I'm not... Leon?"

Solieyu smiled and swatted his friends on their arms.

After they had collected their gold from Gringotts, Andromeda waved the trio on. "Just remember - half an hour. Don't make me come and collect you. And for the love of all that's holy - don't harass the Aurors. They're stressed enough."

"Mum!" Tonks exclaimed, sighing. "We aren't children! We know better than to pick fights with them."

"Yes, yes. Half an hour, dear." Andromeda said, sitting on the steps leading up to the bank.

"Well, where to?" Tonks asked, turning to her friends.

"I actually want to at least look into Twillfit and Tatting's." Harry said.
"I want something *nice* to wear, y'know? Besides, we're required to get dress robes for some reason - don't like the sound of that, by the way - and I figure we might as well at least browse the place."

"Are you kidding? People like Malfoy probably shop there. That place is way too upscale for my tastes." Tonks said. "Besides, it's ridiculously expensive. I'm not blowing any cash there."

"Indeed. Too snooty for my likes." Solieyu agreed.

"You two do know I would buy you any robes you'd like in there, right? What the hell am I gonna do with a small fortune? I mean, there's more than enough in there to pay through the end of my schooling plus the rest of my life. And that's with splurging regularly." Harry said.

"Then get us nice things for Christmas or something." Tonks said, grinning. "That way it wouldn't feel so odd."

Harry smirked. "I'm going to recall this moment if you try telling me what I get you is too nice, then."

"Don't go and spend half your gold on gifts for me." Tonks said, jabbing Harry in the arm with a finger.

"Oh, I won't. But I *will* rethink what I was gonna buy you." Harry said.

"And what might that be?"

"Not telling, of course."

Once they had arrived in the clothing shop, they were immediately greeted by a tall, thin man with an extremely high-pitched voice. He had heavily-greased hair and looked to be the picture of a kiss-up. "And how many I help y--" He began, before opening his eyes and catching sight of Harry's scar.

'Crap,' Harry thought. 'He's not gonna let me go now. Note to self - buy a damned HAT!'

"And an honor it is to be able to serve the one and only Harry Potter!" Crooned the man. "Is there anything in particular I could help you find, sir?"

"Well... I kind of need a set of dress robes, I guess." Harry said, mentally cringing as he slightly slipped back into his old mindset. At least he wasn't stuttering.

"Ah, yes. Big event this year. But I'm sure you've already heard. Right this way, Mr. Potter!" Said the man, straightening up and walking across the shop.

"Uh... alright. I'll be right back, guys." Harry said, making a face once the assistant had vanished around a rack of robes.

"Have fun!" Tonks said in a singsong voice.

Harry sighed, trailing after the man, whose name was apparently 'Zeris' or 'Xerys' or something to that effect - he never would spell it, and Harry kept hearing it come out differently each time the man said it.

Despite Harry's pleas for the man to hurry, the trio were in the shop for at least fifteen minutes before they could escape. Harry didn't go away empty-handed, though. He had gotten a set of deep blue dress robes with pale blue trim. And a ring. The robes had been 'Zurris's doing. The ring had been his own. He had been paying for his robes when he saw it - amidst a ton of other rings displayed under the glass counter - a ring with the mark of Ouroboros on it.

He had put it on his right ring finger before they had even left the store.

"I think Boris will get a kick out of it, if nothing else." Harry said, smiling down at it.

"It's very pretty... but you know you'll get teased about wearing a ring, right?" Tonks said.

"Malfoy's old man wears a good deal of them. He can't say a damn thing against it." Harry replied. "And I'm really sorry for not being able to get away from that ponce sooner."

"No harm done." Tonks said. "We can grab *our* robes after we meet back up with mum. So where do you wanna go next?"

"Gambol and Japes." Harry said, grinning. "Even if we don't catch Fred and George, and I doubt we will seeing as how we're last-minute shopping, we can still look around. Maybe get some new ideas. I wonder if they're updating The List..."

"They'd better be." Tonks said. "We didn't give it to them so they could slack off!"

Solieyu merely rolled his eyes as he followed the two. He didn't mind, really. It was a change of pace, being out and about with friends. Despite this, however, he felt a bit odd. Probably due to the fact that some strange girl had been following them. He didn't recognize her, though she appeared to be around his age. He figured she either didn't know that *he* knew she was following them or else she didn't care. She wasn't being very sneaky about it.

"Either of you know why some girl is trailing us?" Solieyu asked in a hushed voice. "Don't look. Has hair nearly as long as mine, but blonde. Has sunglasses on, so I can't tell the eye color."

Harry blinked, glancing aside at Tonks. "Doesn't sound like anyone I know. Nymmy?"

"Nuh-uh." Replied the girl. "You sure she's following us?"

"Has been ever since we left Twillfit and Tatting's. I don't know if she doesn't realize we know she's been on us since then or not." Solieyu murmured.

"Should we confront her?" Asked Tonks.

"I don't see why not." Harry said. "Not like she could do anything to us. Diagon Alley's not *that* populated. Aurors would be on her in a heartbeat if she tried anything."

"Agreed." Solieyu said, coming to a stop. Harry and Tonks did likewise. The three of them turned in unison to face the strange girl.

Harry raised an eyebrow. She was a bit shorter than he was, but that's about all he could tell of her, dark blonde hair aside. She was indeed wearing sunglasses - a pair so dark that Harry doubted one could see her eyes even if they were up close - and had a very tomboyish air about her. She had on dark jeans and an off-white blouse on. She came to a stop just in front of the trio.

"Care to tell us why you've been following us?" Harry asked.

The girl turned her head and gave Harry the once-over. She then turned and looked at Solieyu. "Not particularly." She replied in a thick accent that sounded Russian to Harry.

"Care to stop it, then?" Replied Harry, voice dry.

"Not particularly." Retorted the girl, removing her sunglasses. Her eyes were about as grey as Malfoy's were, though they were a bit lighter.

"Right. This is getting us nowhere." Tonks chimed in. "Either cut it out or we'll sic the Aurors on you for being suspicious."

The girl raised her eyebrows, finally looking to Tonks. After a moment, she smirked, slipping the sunglasses back on. "Very well. It isn't as though I will not be seeing you again soon enough." She said. And, before she turned to leave, she stepped up to Solieyu and practically growled, "And you... had better watch your back."

Solieyu blinked as the girl walked off. "...That was interesting."

"You sure you don't know her, Leon?" Tonks asked. "Seemed like she knew *you*."

"I've never met her before in my life." Solieyu said, frowning. "I think I'd remember eyes like those."

"Creeped you out too?" Asked Harry.

"Quite."

"So... do we continue on, or go back to mum?" Tonks asked.

"I say we go back to your mother." Harry said. "Tell her about the girl. Just in case."

"What do you think she meant?" Solieyu wondered aloud as the three headed back towards Gringotts. "She isn't a Hogwarts student, is she?"

"Don't think she is." Harry said. "To be fair, I try not to spend my time studying the students. Especially the female ones. I have enough fangirls as is. I don't need any think I've got eyes for them."

"A transfer, maybe?" Asked Solieyu.

"Possibly. Still doesn't make sense that she'd threaten you, though. Especially if you two don't know each other." Harry replied. "Very odd, this situation."

"No sense worrying about it." Tonks said. "I say we try and forget about it and enjoy the rest of our day... even if most of it *will* be routine shopping."

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Harry sighed as he flopped down. "Ahh, the Express. Couldn't they *do* something with this thing once in awhile? So... so very red."

Tonks snorted. "Red's not your color?"

"What do you think? I'm not a ruddy Gryffindor." Harry replied, grinning.

The trip to King's Cross had been very hurried and quiet and the group, by some miracle or another, had managed to make it with plenty of time to spare. Things seemed pretty chilly on the platform itself, though. Most folks were talking in hushed tones about what might be happening at the school that year.

Solieyu, stretched out along the seat opposite his friends, dryly muttered, "Not that you can tell at times."

"And just what's *THAT* supposed to mean?" Harry demanded.

"It means you've got a little of all four Houses in you." Tonks stated. "You've got the brainpower for Ravenclaw, of course. But you're also the type to just charge right in and save your friends."

"Plus you've done more than your fair share of sneaking about. And let's not forget your various 'dark' abilities." Solieyu added, looking at Harry's left sleeve, where he knew Boris was lurking.

"Plus you're wishy-washy, just like the Hufflepuffs!" Tonks said brightly, grinning.

"Oi!"

"Oh, good. Everyone's together!" Came a peppy voice from the compartment door. The trio of Ravenclaws looked over to see Luna Lovegood entering, a newspaper tucked under one arm. Solieyu

swung his legs to the ground and scooted to one side to allow her to sit.

"Hullo Luna." Harry said. "Have a good summer?"

"Oh, yes." Luna replied, sitting next to Solieyu with a smile. "My father and I went to deepest, darkest Switzerland to search for Glumbumbles!"

"Uh... that's great!" Harry said, momentarily baffled by a *couple* of things the blonde had just said.

"And how have all of you been?" Asked Luna. And though the question was open to all three, she had been gazing over at Solieyu when she had said it. Trying not to smirk too hard, Harry gave Solieyu a regal nod, which he scowled at.

Solieyu then launched into his own summer - which had been a mostly quiet time at home with his mother - and that of the other two. Luna just nodded in key places and, once Solieyu had finished, she took her newspaper - The Quibbler, of course - out and opened it up.

"Have you heard?" Asked Luna, a few minutes later.

"Heard?" Tonks asked. "Heard about what?"

"Terry Boot." Luna said.

"Terry? What about him?" Harry asked. "The loudmouth land himself in trouble?"

"They say he killed his father." Luna replied.

An odd silence filled the cabin for a moment, followed by Harry asking, "*What?*"

Luna glanced up, folding The Quibbler up and holding it out for Harry. He took it and glanced down at it. A bold headline spoke of Terry's father's body being found, with Terry being nowhere around. Judging from the article, Terry was wanted for the slaying. Harry passed the newspaper over to Tonks, who in turn handed it over to Solieyu.

"He was too noisy for his own good and started to get into a grey area last year, but... murder? Do you really think he's capable?" Asked Harry, glancing thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

"I doubt it." Tonks said. "Even if he did, he'd be the type to sit at the scene of the crime just so he could blab about what a grand a glorious battle it had been. He'd claim self-defense, of course."

"Of course." Harry agreed. "Luna, Leon?"

"I think he could." Solieyu said, handing the newspaper back to Luna. "I think anyone could murder if the circumstances were right. Or wrong, as the case may be."

"I think he could, as well." Luna said, her voice a bit quieter than Harry was used to hearing it. She had hidden herself behind the paper again, but the odd look that had passed over Solieyu's face filled in the details of why. Of course Luna would believe he was capable of terrible things. Anyone who had been treated like that would be more than a little biased.

"On the up side, we don't have to worry about him!" Harry said cheerfully, trying to lighten the mood up a bit.

"Unless he decides to come and kill you, too." Luna said, her voice back to its normal, slightly-bizarre tone.

"Uh... yeah. Unless he decides to come and kill me. Not that he *could*, as I believe I've proven I'm more than a match for the little weasel." Harry said.

"Did someone say weasel?" Came a pair of voices from the doorway. Harry slapped his forehead and groaned.

Fred laughed. "Now now, Harry! No need to hit yourself!"

"Yeah!" George agreed. "We can smack you if you'd like!"

"And a good day to you two, too." Harry replied dryly.

"We have come to deliver greetings, news, and a warning!" Fred exclaimed, holding his arms out wide.

"As the greetings should be well and done with," George continued, "Let us move on to the news! First, we know what's going to happen at Hogwarts this year. And it means that, sooner or later, you will know yet another one of us!"

"Tell us!" Tonks said, practically bouncing in her seat. "It's been driving Harry batty!"

Fred wagged a finger. "Ah ah ah! We said we knew - we did not say that we would *tell*!"

"Wha... ooh, you two..." Tonks growled, glaring at them as Harry chuckled.

"Another one of you?" Solieyu asked. "How many are there?"

"Well, we have a couple of older brothers. Charlie's off dealing with dragons in Romania. And Bill? Well, he's a Cursebreaker." George said, smirking. Clearly, the twins were rather proud of both of them.

"And Percy... ..well, Percy's a ponce who's been going into the Ministry with dad whenever he can. We think he's trying to figure out how to firmly attach himself to the Minister's backside, but..." Fred continued, rolling his eyes.

Tonks snorted.

"Okay, what else do you have?" Harry asked. "What's second?"

"Second!" George began. "Second is that we know who the new Defense professor's gonna be... Overheard dad talking to him one morning."

"Not gonna tell us that either, are ya?" Asked Tonks.

"Give the girl a prize!" Fred exclaimed.

"Right in one, little Dora!" George said, grinning as the girl bristled.
"But rest assured - it's gonna be brilliant."

"Yeah. Dumbledore's hooked a good one this time! Shouldn't have any problems with *him*. Well, aside from the ones he's known for, anyway." Fred chuckled.

"No one calls me 'Dora' - ick..." Tonks muttered darkly.

"Anything else?" Asked Harry.

"Nope. So on to the warning - avoid Hermione like the *PLAGUE*." George said, face suddenly getting as serious as Harry had ever seen it been.

"What? Why?"

"Because she's been on about house elf rights since the damn Cup, that's why." Fred said. "Honestly, the girl is losing it."

"Right. So if she approaches you and tries chatting you up about the subject, find a way out." George said.

"Oh look at this. Someone already rounded up the filth for us..." Said a drawling voice from just outside the compartment.

"We love you too, Malfoy!" Tonks called out.

"Harry?" George asked, turning to the boy and raising an eyebrow.

"We can handle him." Harry replied, grinning. "You two go have fun."

"As you wish!" Fred said. The twins slipped out, shoving forcefully past Malfoy and his band of (un)merry Slytherins. "One side, you little milksop, lest we send you back to the toilet!"

"That was the greatest prank they ever did to him." Harry remembered aloud, a wistful grin on his face.

"Yes, very amusing." Replied Draco Malfoy, eyes narrowed.

"Wotcher, cousin o' mine!" Tonks said cheerfully. "S'a matter? Goyle wouldn't let you snog him?"

Draco sputtered, turning slightly green. Somewhere out in the hall, Crabbe laughed as Goyle made similar noises. Then both let out tremendous groans as Pansy Parkinson shoved her way past them. "Draco, *WHY* must you spend all of *OUR* precious time seeking out *HIM*?"

"You sought me out a bit on your own last year, if you'll recall." Harry said, eyeballing the girl. She had gotten thinner, somehow. At least her nose was filling itself out. She might escape pugdom if that kept up.

"I was bored." Claimed Pansy. "Now then, Draco?"

"Be silent, woman!" Draco spat, glaring over his shoulder. "We'll go when I'm ready to and not a second sooner!"

"Oh, don't you order *me* around. I'll jam your wand so far up your arse you'll be begging those weasels to put you on the pot again!" Pansy snapped, getting up in Draco's face. The blonde clearly wasn't expecting such a backlash, as his eyes were wide and he quickly glanced at Crabbe and Goyle, who were conveniently not paying attention.

Tonks let out a low whistle. "She's got you *whipped*, Malfoy."

"Shut up!" Draco growled, putting a hand on Pansy's shoulder and forcefully shoving her. "And *you* had better learn to keep your foul mouth closed, too! Don't forget - my father owns *both* of your parents!"

Pansy narrowed her eyes at the blonde, but otherwise remained silent, getting to her feet and storming off down the corridor. Unfortunately, in doing so, she also smashed both Crabbe's and Goyle's faces into the windows.

"Did you come to discuss women troubles, perhaps?" Asked Harry. "Sorry, Malfoy, but I'm rather happy with my own situation. Can't help you out."

Draco smirked. "The day I ask *you* for help is the day I renounce my pureblood heritage."

"And the day I actually *help* you is the day I kiss Snape's boots." Harry said, inclining his head.

"Watch your back this year, Potter." Draco said, his smirk getting wider. "You never know what might happen."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Asked Harry.

"You'll see." Draco said, chuckling. "Or perhaps you won't. I wouldn't travel alone if I were you, though."

And with that, the Slytherins were gone, leaving the four Ravenclaws to ponder even more information. Harry let out a long, audible groan. They weren't even at Hogwarts yet and already he had a headache. Terry and his father, the twins being prats and not telling him anything, Malfoy giving him a bizarre warning that may or may not have actually been a threat.

"I'm going to take a nap." He finally declared, leaning against the wall and letting his eyes close. "Because if I don't, my bloody head is going to explode."

"Yeah, it's been an information-packed trip, hasn't it? We need to start writing to people more often." Tonks agreed.

"Um..." Solieyu said, his voice a bit higher pitched than usual. Glancing over, Harry and Tonks saw that Luna, at some point in the past twenty minutes, had leaned against Solieyu and fell asleep.

Tonks let out a giggle. "Awww! She's so sweet on you..."

"Careful, Leon. Girls can be a handfu--**OUCH!** ...See?" Harry said, wincing as he rubbed his left arm.

Solieyu let out a long-suffering sigh, and it was all the other two could do to keep from laughing loud enough to wake the slumbering Luna up.

Chapter 8 – A Moody Start

"I'm home."

Harry smiled as he stepped through the giant doors leading into Hogwarts. Despite the insanity that tended to break out at the school, it still felt like his true home. The train ride had taken a shorter time than usual, it had seemed, though most of that was due to the fact that no one had awakened him until they were pulling into Hogsmeade Station. As they had walked to the carriages that brought them up to the school, Harry had brought up the subject of finding a new 'nest,' so to speak. The tower was getting a bit small for them.

The four Ravenclaws filtered into the Great Hall and sat at their usual spots. It still felt like it was only a short time ago that he had first set foot into the room, worries of the Sorting on his mind. A lot had happened since then and he had somehow managed to scrape through. He considered himself very lucky in more ways than one.

"Glad it wasn't raining." Tonks said.

"Yeah. Being drenched wouldn't do." Harry agreed. "Anyway, like I was sayin' - I may go for a late-night stroll tonight or something, since I spent so much time sleeping on the train and all. See if I can't dredge us up a new place to hang out."

"It *would* be nice to have a bigger area. The Nest was fine and all, but we're getting too big for it." Tonks said.

"I doubt the Map would be any help. And I have a feeling that whatever gets revealed in here tonight will give me a lot to think about..." Harry muttered.

"It can't be that bad." Solieyu said, reasonably. "Dumbledore may be a bit... well, a bit off, but..."

"Yeah, I don't trust the old man too much." Harry said. "Not as much as I probably should, anyway."

"Well, you're a special case. Naturally, you'd be a bit bitter to the man." Solieyu said. "All things considered, you could probably link most of your major injuries and hardships back to him."

"On that note, how does he do that eye thing?" Asked Harry, glancing up at the staff table where Dumbledore was leaning aside to listen to something McGonagall was telling him.

"What, the twinkles?" Tonks asked. "I dunno. Think it has any effect?"

"Effect? Such as?" Harry said. "I never really thought about that. Maybe it has a calming effect on people?"

"Could be." Tonks said. "We should run some tests!"

"How?"

"Ah, I dunno. I'll think of something." Tonks said, waving a dismissive hand. "Oh, and McGonagall's off to retrieve the firsties!"

McGonagall crossed the Great Hall swiftly, returning a few minutes later with a group of small, scared-looking children. Harry let out a chuckle when he saw them. "Were we ever that lit--" He stopped mid-sentence when the last person entered. "Oi..."

Tonks scowled and Solieyu let out a sigh. At the end of the line of first years was a girl that was clearly older than them. Her long, dirty blonde hair was pulled back into a low ponytail and her grey eyes immediately swept the room, coming to a rest when they landed on Harry and his friends.

"Guess we were right with the transfer student guess." Tonks mumbled.

"Great. Looks like you'll hafta watch yourself more than usual, Leon." Harry added, turning to the vampire. "Whatever she's got against you, now that we know she's *here*..."

"Anyone gonna place bets against her *not* being Sorted into Slytherin as fast as Malfoy was?" Asked Tonks, glaring at the girl, who offered a smirk in return.

"Maybe Parkinson and her can cancel each other out. Anyone gonna place bets against her not trying to drag Malfoy into a broom closet?" Harry responded.

"As long as she's not in our House - and I can't imagine that she would be - I don't have anything to worry about. You two probably didn't notice it, but she smells odd. I can't figure out in what way, though." Solieyu said, making a face. "I want to say I know what it is, but I'm drawing a blank."

"Rotten apples?" Tonks offered.

"Toilet?" Harry tried.

Solieyu rolled his eyes. "Quiet, you two. The Sorting Hat's up."

And indeed it was. The old, tattered-looking hat had just been placed on a stool in front of the staff table, where a rip in it opened and it proceeded to belt out a song. One of House unity and sticking together in times of hardship. Harry frowned as he listened to it sing, leaning over to Tonks and whispering, "Who pissed in the hat's cereal this morning? Seems a bit morose, doesn't it?"

"Well, it probably gets boring thinking up new songs each year." Tonks whispered back. "And getting stuck on head after head every twelve months. Can't imagine it's a very fun existence."

When the Hat finished its song, McGonagall unrolled a length of parchment and called the first name (Aquinton, Geoffrey) on it. The wide-eyed boy carefully approached the Sorting Hat and placed it on his head. After a good minute of time, with the boy making several faces, the Hat cried out, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Messer, Secunda."

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Kilbourne, Franklin."

"SLYTHERIN!"

And so it went. Each of the Houses got an almost even amount of new students, with Hufflepuff reeling in one more than everyone else. And then it was the blonde-haired girl's time. But instead of the Hat immediately yelling out 'SLYTHERIN!' there seemed to be an odd sort of mental debate going on.

"Unexpected turn of events. We don't like unexpected." Harry declared in a whisper.

After a good long time - one that rivalled Harry's own time with the Hat - its mouth appeared again and it called, "GRYFFINDOR!"

"Highly unexpected." Harry said, watching the blonde smile as she headed over to the Gryffindor table. "Somethin' wrong here."

"Oh, stop being paranoid." Tonks said, swatting him on the arm.

"If I'm not paranoid, no one will be." Harry said, grinning slightly. "Besides, after the way she threatened Leon, her getting sorted into Gryffindor's a bit of an oddity, don't you think?"

"I'll talk to Fred and George." Solieyu said, eyes still on the girl. "See if they can rope our other red-scarfed allies into keeping an eye on her."

"Sounds good to me." Harry said. "Now then, next point of business - where the hell's the new Defense professor?"

"Good question." Tonks replied, glancing along the staff table as McGonagall toted the stool and Sorting Hat off.

But the answer to their question would have to wait. After a quick tuck-in declaration from Dumbledore, food appeared along the tables. Harry would have protested in irritation, but his stomach hadn't had any treats during the train ride due to his nap, so it took higher priority. He would have plenty of time to be on-edge - right now, he wanted to inhale a large amount of delicious-looking pasta.

"Uwaa, I'm stuffed..." Tonks said, roughly fifteen minutes later. She leaned back on the bench and held her stomach, which was noticeably puffed out. "How come you didn't eat much, Harry?"

"Trust me, I wanted to." Harry replied, scowling. "I'll eat later - I'm not stuffing myself before the old man decides to drop the two bombs on us..."

Solieyu, goblet half raised to his mouth, suddenly went very stiff.

"Leon? What's up?" Harry asked.

"Unnatural smell." Solieyu hissed, his fangs noticably visible. "I've smelled it before..."

"What? When?" Asked Tonks, leaning forward.

"When I was little - it wasn't long after the turn," Solieyu began, his voice extremely quiet so as not to be overheard, "A few Aurors turned up at the house. It--"

But before Solieyu could continue, Dumbledore was on his feet again, smiling. With a wave of his hand, the food and drink all vanished. "Well, now that we're all fed and watered, I have two things I would like to announce! As many of you may have heard, Hogwarts will play host to a special event - one that hasn't been held in a wizard's age, if you'll pardon the saying. This year, Hogwarts will be hosting the Triwizard Tournament!"

An immediate, hushed outbreak of talking filled the room. The headmaster stood silently, waiting patiently for the students to quiet back down. Once they had, he continued, "Our guests - students from wizarding schools Beauxbatons and Durmstrang - will be arriving within the week. I expect you all to be as curteous to them as you would your own family or House members. More will be said on the event as it draws closer. But for now, I'm sure many of you have noticed an empty spot at our staff table. Our new Defense professor had a few things to attend to before settling in, but I am happy to announce that he has finally arrived."

The doors to the Great Hall slowly opened and an old, grizzled wizard hobbled his way in. From the sound one of his legs was making, it was apparent that it was fake. But that wasn't what was on Harry's mind at the moment. No, he was more interested in the wizard's face. or what was *left* of it. It looked like something had taken a huge bite

out of his nose at one point. And one of the man's eyes was frighteningly blue and rather large. Only when he had walked into the room a ways did Harry pick up on the fact that it was whirling around in the socket.

"Mad-Eye Moody." Solieyu hissed, keeping his head down. "Damn the headmaster, what's he *thinking*?"

"You know that guy?" Harry replied, eyebrows raised.

"He was one of the Aurors who came to ensure I was 'safe,' so to speak..." Solieyu said, glaring at the old wizard. "I don't like him. He's paranoid. Thinks everything is evil and out to get him personally... He stinks of dark magic."

"Dark magic? But if he's an Auror..." Tonks began.

"It's *because* he's an Auror." Solieyu said, straightening up a bit when Moody had passed by. "Surrounding themselves with it constantly, aren't they? It comes off on them after a long enough time."

"What's with the one eye?" Harry asked.

"Magical." Tonks said. "They're pretty rare and his is a really old model, I think. Looked a lot larger than his real eye, anyway. There's been leaps and bounds in the artificial body part department since he got it, I'd reckon."

"How come I've never heard of that kind of thing?" Harry asked.

"Hogwarts wouldn't have any books on the subject. Madam Pomfrey probably would, but it's more the type of thing St. Mungo's keeps handy. You see ads in the Prophet every now and then, though. And there's usually some large announcement whenever somebody makes a breakthrough." Tonks explained. "I used to bounce the idea of being a mediwitch around in my head a few years ago. Before I met you guys."

"You? A mediwitch? No offense, Nymmy, but... ...Well, alright, I'd rather you be my nurse than that old battleaxe we have now, but that's not the point..." Harry said. He earned a light swat for his efforts.

Once Moody had made his way to the staff table - slowly inspecting every person at it as he went by them - he nodded to Dumbledore. Dumbledore, in turn, faced the students again and announced, "Please welcome Alastor Moody - he will be teaching you Defense Against the Dark Arts this year!"

There was a smattering of applause from around the room, save for the Slytherin table. The older students seemed to be downright spooked of the old man. The first years did too, but for entirely different reasons. Harry didn't blame them - Moody looked like he had just gotten out of a manticores attack.

From there, Dumbledore made his usual announcements about the Forbidden Forest and Filch's notes on the banning of all things fun, the students were officially free to head back to their Houses. As the Prefects lead students towards the proper spots, Harry motioned for his group to head for the Nest.

"Either of you know what the Triwizard Tournament is?" Harry asked, hands in his pockets.

"I've only heard vague things about it." Tonks said. "It's supposed to be pretty dangerous."

"Rings no bells to me." Solieyu said. "I'm more worried about that blasted Auror being on staff. If the hospital wing isn't filled with students who've caused the loon to blast them, it'll be a miracle."

"I dunno if I've ever seen you like this, Leon." Tonks said, turning to the vampire. "You usually get on pretty well with everyone."

"Yeah, well... He turned me into a damned bat, then a wolf, then laughed and told me that I wouldn't have any friends. I'm not going to go and have afternoon *TEA* with the man!" Solieyu said, a strange glow in his eyes.

"He did *what*?" Harry exclaimed. "Surely you could've... I dunno, sued the Aurors or something for being treated like that, couldn't you?"

"Dark creature." Solieyu stated, eyes narrow again. "We have very few rights to speak of."

"Go wizarding world." Tonks said in a deadpan cheer. "Let's hear it for equal rights."

"I think... I'm going to go cool down." Solieyu said, coming to a stop. "I don't like being this way... and anger has always built up when I think of Mad-Eye Moody."

"You gonna be okay? Want us to come with?" Harry asked.

"I'll be fine. Need to go see Poppy anyway. She gets angry if I don't check in at the start of term." Solieyu said, turning and raising an arm. "If there's any higher power at all, we won't get Defense as our first class."

"He jinxed it." Tonks whispered once Solieyu was out of sight.

"Yeah. You know... it's really weird seeing him mad. Like actually *mad* and not faking it like he did with Dudley and his gang..." Harry said, walking again.

"Yeah, it's pretty rare... Hope he doesn't try going after Moody, though." Tonks said, making a face. "That wouldn't do."

"I'm not so worried about Leon as I am about that girl... what was her name, anyway? Did you catch it?" Harry asked.

Tonks closed her eyes and, jabbing a finger into the air, did a remarkable impression of McGonagall. "Aethon, Demetra!"

"Demetra, huh?" Harry repeated, hands slipping into his pockets. "Damn it. It's the first day back and three things are already threatening to drive me insane. One, I have a bad feeling about that Triwizard Tournament thing. Two, Moody threw my mental warning alarms off on his own - that he gets to Leon so much only makes it worse. And, of course, that girl."

Tonks patted Harry on the shoulder as the two slipped through the invisible wall and made their way up the spiral stairway. "Poor Harry. Three puzzles at once. So, oh great detective, anything you wanna watch out for?"

Pushing open the trapdoor, Harry smiled briefly as he stepped into the Raven's Nest, the furnishings unchanged since they had left a few months back. Flopping down onto the couch, he ran a hand back through his hair. "Not really." He said. "Too early to start finding pieces to the puzzles. And there's still something bothering me..."

"What?" Tonks asked, sitting next to Harry.

"Dress robes. Surely the Triwizard Tournament wouldn't warrant needing a pair. I know we'll be having 'guests' over, so to speak, but..."

Tonks frowned. "I guess that's true... So *four* things to wonder about, huh?"

"Fitting, isn't it?" Harry said, leaning his head back and chuckling. "Fourth year, four problems. I hope this doesn't continue. Providing I make it to seventh year, I don't want to have seven issues to deal with."

Tonks bopped Harry on the arm. "Don't talk like that. You know it weirds me out. You'll get by just fine and then... then..."

"Then?"

"I dunno. I haven't really thought about life after school... There anything you wanna be, job-wise?"

Harry tilted his head in thought. What *did* he want to be? Playing Quidditch professionally would definitely be fun... but then again, he had enough raving fans as it was. The thought of even more made him shudder. But what else did he know? Despite reading a good deal, it rarely covered jobs in the wizarding world. He certainly wasn't the type to want to sit around at a desk job. Even as a Ravenclaw, he would be bored silly.

"I think..." He said after a good deal of silence. "That I might consider becoming an Auror..."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Problem there is that the Ministry is filled with idiots. I'd only go down that path if something came along to fix things up. The Aurors at present aren't exactly on top of their game." Harry said.

"True." Tonks agreed, laying her head over onto Harry's shoulder. "I really dunno what I wanna do..."

"Hair stylist?" Harry suggested, grinning.

"Oh, shut up."

Laughing, Harry slipped an arm around Tonks, his eyes slipping shut.
"...Five."

"Eh?"

"Five problems." Harry murmured, a sigh escaping his lips. "Terry."

"Oh, Terry can go bugger a knothole. I don't want to think about him." Tonks said.

"Out of sight, out of mind?"

"Something like that."

Harry nodded, tilting his head so that it lightly rested atop Tonks'.
"...Oi."

"Hm?"

"Our new hideout? Gonna have enough room for a bed."

Tonks let out a sleepy giggle. "Our necks are gonna be soooooore in the morning."

"Yup."

"We're probably gonna be late."

"Yup."

"You got awfully quiet."

"Sorry." Harry said, smiling. "'Bout to drift off. Oh, hey, I have an idea..."

"What?"

Harry lazily started hissing. After a moment, a muffled reply came from around the middle of his right sleeve. Nudging Tonks, he slipped back into English and explained, "Told him to wake me up somehow once it got light out."

"You sure you wanna do that?" Asked Tonks.

"Boris wouldn't bite me." Harry said. "He'll figure out something."

"If you say so." Tonks mumbled, kicking off her shoes and bringing her legs up onto the couch. "Your arm's gonna fall 'sleep."

"S'okay." Harry said. "S'worth it."

"Night, Harry."

"Night."

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"Is this what you wanted?"

"It *is* your doing."

"Shut up."

"Don't like hearing the truth?"

"I said shut up."

"Or what?"

"Or you'll die."

"And then you'd be alone."

"So?"

"You'd go mad."

"Haven't I already?"

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly, the view of the ruined grounds burned into his eyes. Coiled loosely over his shoulders was Boris, paying more attention to his master than the destruction. The two were up on the highest point of Hogwarts - or at least, what remained of such a place. The rubble had formed a suitable place to sit, though it still bothered Harry that he was basically sitting on the graves of all the former headmasters and headmistresses of the school.

It had only ended a few hours before. Now they sat and stared out across what they had done. The snowy ground was tinged pink from all the blood that had been spilled, and the stench was still noticable even as high up as they were.

The Death Eaters and their Master were gone, yes, but it had been a high price to pay for it. The spell had gone awry, erupting in all directions, unable to tell friend from foe. It didn't care what it ripped asunder. In the end, it had struck Voldemort and torn him, as well. But Harry had remained the only survivor of the massacre.

Numb, he had barely glanced around to find his friends - or what remained of them, anyway - before heading back towards the shattered stone wreck that was once a school. Though clearly on its last legs, the school accomodated Harry as he made his way to the tallest point... what was once barely half the school's height. Ravenclaw Tower was now drifting in pieces out in the lake, a surprise Christmas present from the dragons and their riders. Voldemort had wanted to send a clear message to Harry that the battle would both start and end at the school.

"Now what will you do? It's only a matter of time before outside help arrives." Hissed the snake.

Harry raised his head, hand still covering it. "...What I should have done when I used it."

"And myself?"

"You're free." Harry said, removing the taipan. "Thank you, Boris."

"It isn't possible to save you. What is there to thank me for?"

"Keeping my sanity. If nothing else. Goodbye."

The snake recoiled as the scent of the curse passed over him once more. More instinct than anything else - he had grown to know the spell well in the past day. The flash of light alone was enough to cause him to start.

"For all the good it did you in the end. I'm sorry."

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"Let the snake wake you up! Brilliant strategy!"

"Shhhhut up!"

"You sure you're alright?"

"I'm *FINE*. My throat's still sore. I wonder *why*."

"I simply did what you told me to do. What would you have preferred?" Hissed Boris.

Rubbing his neck, Harry scowled. "Well, I would have preferred you *not* cutting off the oxygen to my brain!"

"I gotta admit, waking up because you fell off the couch was pretty funny." Tonks said, grinning.

"I'm not very fond of *either* of you." Harry said, pouting.

"Oh, you're just bitter. C'mon, if we're late to breakfast, I'll never forgive you." Tonks stated, grabbing Harry by the hand and tugging him along faster.

"Hey!"

A few minutes later, and after having met up with Solieyu en route, the trio arrived in the Great Hall. It was still early, and not everyone

had arrived yet. Moody, Harry noted, was thankfully late. The man simply didn't settle well with him. In addition, it meant that Solieyu wasn't on edge. Apparently, the vampire had holed himself up in the hospital wing the previous night. How he got Madam Pomfrey to agree was beyond Harry's reasoning.

"Crap, here come the owls!" Tonks cried, covering her food up so it wouldn't get owl matter in it. "Why do they hafta come so early!"

"Isn't that Hedwig?" Solieyu pointed out, glancing up from his goblet.

"Who would be sending me a package with my own owl?" Harry asked, frowning. Once the snowy owl had landed with the rather rectangular package, he stroked her feathers and offered up a bit of bacon for her. "Now what are you doing here, girl? What's that you've brought me?"

"Eww..." Tonks said, once Harry had torn the brown wrapping paper off.

Harry's frown deepened. He was staring down at a book. A very old, very ratty one that looked to be one step removed from falling apart entirely. It seemed to be a general book on Potions, which only further led to Harry's confusion. "Who the hell would send me an ancient book on Potions? Is this some kind of joke from Snape?"

At that very moment, the person in question entered the Great Hall, alongside the headmaster. Halfway into the room, the Potions Master happened to glare Harry's way and, in doing so, caught sight of the item in front of him. His expression immediately changed - paled - for the briefest of moments. Then a fury, unlike any Harry had seen on the man before, overcame him. Fortunately, Dumbledore had put an arm around the man's shoulder and spun him around towards the staff table once more.

On the way up, for Dumbledore seemed to have a death grip on Snape's shoulder so that he couldn't escape, a heated, hushed conversation took place. One that ended with Snape flopping into his usual spot, a look of disgust on his face. The headmaster continued to his spot at the center and sat, glancing only briefly at Harry.

"Leon, you pick up any of that?" Harry asked.

"Not a word of it. Dumbledore must have muted it out somehow." Solieyu said. "...I would reckon a guess that your new book is apparently Snape's, though, judging by his reaction."

Picking the tattered book up, Harry opened it to check. "No mention of Snape in here. Just some bloke calling himself the Half-Blood Prince."

"Could still be him, though, couldn't it?" Tonks asked.

"Wouldn't surprise me. If it isn't his, it belonged to someone very close to him." Harry said, nodding. "And judging from the headmaster cutting Snape off, he probably sent it to me."

"But why?" Tonks asked. "Why send you some old-as-dirt Potions book now? Why not a *new* one, for that matter?"

"Dunno." Harry said, carefully flipping through a few of the pages. "...Oi. Someone's written all over this thing."

"What's it say?" Asked Solieyu, leaning forward slightly.

"Seems to be commentary about what's written in the book proper." Harry said. "Like he's adding notes and stuff."

Tonks snorted. "Yeah, it's gotta be Snape's. Only that greasy git could think he knew more than someone who wrote a *book* on potions."

"I'll give it a read tonight." Harry said. "Though I think I should keep it and leave it up in the Nest until I get it memorized. Don't want Snape catching me with it, that's for sure."

"Wanna go tuck it away there now?" Asked Tonks. "He won't be able to trail after you with Dumbledore keeping watch."

"Good idea. Be back soon. If McGonagall comes around with our schedules, get mine from her!" Harry said, getting to his feet and hefting the book under one arm.

As expected, Snape's eyes went wide and he got to his feet. But the headmaster cleared his throat rather loudly, causing the man to freeze, a slow glare forming on his face.

"Oh man, Potions is gonna be *HELL*." Tonks mumbled. "Snape's gonna fail Harry - and probably both of us - the whole bloody year..."

"Probably. But when does he *not*?" Solieyu asked, taking a sip of pumpkin juice. "I'm sure he'll try riling Harry up more than usual, though. Gotta watch out for that."

"True." Tonks agreed. "Oh hey. Your girlfriend's here."

"My... what?" Solieyu sputtered, glancing to the side. "...Oh. Her. Not funny."

The long-haired blonde had entered, along with a couple of other Gryffindor fourth years. She looked, to Solieyu, very out of place in Gryffindor's colors. He still got a bad vibe off of her and felt that she would do a lot better in Slytherin.

"Wonderful." Muttered the vampire, turning to drown his irritation in pumpkin juice.

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"Something wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You've been acting strangely ever since I woke you."

"Nightmare." Harry said. "That's all. Just...different from the usual."

"How so?" Asked Boris.

"Everyone died. Except you."

"How did I survive?"

"I set you down before I killed myself." Harry murmured. "You woke me up right after my body toppled over the edge of where we were sitting."

"I'm glad I woke you up, then."

"So am I." Hissed Harry, a shiver going down his spine. "Promise me something?"

"Yes?"

"If something should happen in the future - I'm just saying - promise you'll try to keep me sane. If, for whatever reason, I decide to surround myself with the Dark Arts, I want you to make sure my mind doesn't go too far off the beaten path." Harry said.

"A heavy promise to make." Boris replied. "I don't like promises. But I will try my best."

"That's good enough for me." Harry said.

"Anything else bothering you?"

"Everything." Harry said, frowning. "Moody, this book, the strange dreams I've been having lately, the Triwizard Tournament and having guests visit the school... it's like Fate looked at the past three years and went 'dump that much on him in a single year and see how he does *then*' or something. I don't like this setup, Boris. I don't like it at all."

Though Boris picked up on another's scent, he felt it meaningless to pass the information along. His friend was obviously unsettled at the moment. Making him feel as though he were being followed wouldn't be wise. As best he could tell, there was no malicious intent coming from their follower.

"Harry?"

"Huh?"

"You need to relax. You're going to get jumpy."

"...I suppose. But given all that's happened, can you blame me?"
Asked Harry.

"Not as such, no. But even so, it isn't good to be so tightly wound. Not at your age. Stop worrying so much. If you'd like, I could talk about my former master until we return to the Great Hall."

"Really? Will you--"

"No."

"Damn."

"What he did was far too strong for the likes of you. I've told you that. I will, however, tell you of his other accomplishments. Especially as some of them led to rather humorous results."

"This isn't going to spoil my appetite, is it?"

"...It may."

"Damn. Okay, tell it anyway. I'm going to go crazy if I don't get a distraction."

And, from somewhere behind them, a glare was sent out. All the person could make out was a bunch of back-and-forth hissing. That was more than a little bothersome. Whatever Potter had left the Hall for, it seemed to have him tense. And, at the very least, that might be used to an advantage.

It was all a matter of time.

Chapter 9 – Visitors

"What happens now?" Asked the dove.

"We fight." Murmured the crow, staring down at the grounds. "We fight..."

"We can't fight." Replied the dove. "They're too strong."

"What other option do we have?" Asked the crow. "Lay down and be slaughtered?"

"We'll die either way." Said the dove, feathers ruffling. "What does it matter what way it happens?"

"I can't believe you - *you*, of all people - are talking this way." The crow said, head turned.

"Oh? And why is that?"

The crow shifted so that it was fully facing the dove. "We got into this mess together, we'll get out of it. I promised you that much."

"Promises mean very little." Said the dove, head lowered.

"Only if you never intended to keep them."

The dove looked up again, a sigh escaping. Off in the distance, another flying creature was approaching. "We've got company."

"So it would seem." Agreed the crow. "We'll continue this later. Don't take my word so lightly. As long as I'm alive... no one will be killed."

The dove gave the crow a strange look before turning and taking flight. The crow watched it dive down and around one of the school's towers. Moments later, the flapping of wings filled its ears once more. Tilting its head up, the crow found itself looking into the newly-arrived bat's eyes.

"I have news."

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"Another bad dream?" Asked Tonks.

"Not so much bad as strange." Harry replied, yawning. "No idea what to make of it."

The two were heading down from Ravenclaw Tower. Their first Defense class was that morning. And, despite Harry's wariness around Mad-Eye Moody, he was interested in seeing what the old man had in store for them.

"Where's Leon?" Harry asked.

"Dunno. We've got plenty of time - wanna check the hospital?"

"Sure."

Changing courses, the two began their trek down to the Hospital Wing. Once they arrived, Harry opened the door slightly and peeked inside. No one was inside, though it was clear that someone other than the uppity matron was in her office. Shrugging, Harry let himself in, Tonks slipping in behind him.

"Man, I hate this place." Harry commented, gazing around.

"Don't blame ya." Tonks said, sniffing. "This place smells... sterile."

Before they got to Madam Pomfrey's office, its door opened up. The hospital's overseer stepped out, Solieyu following. The two stopped when they spotted Harry and Tonks. Pomfrey glanced over her shoulder and, receiving a nod from the vampire, rolled her eyes and went to busy herself straightening up the beds.

"Morning, bright eyes!" Tonks said, grinning. "...Leon?"

Solieyu didn't look good at all. If anything, he looked paler than normal, and his eyes seemed sunken. "I've not had a good night. We need to go somewhere to talk. We can't be followed."

Harry blinked. "Sure, let's go to the Nest. What's up?"

"Later." Solieyu murmured, stepping past the two. Harry and Tonks looked at one another, eyebrows raised, and proceeded to follow their friend.

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"You know how I told you how that girl smelled odd?" Solieyu asked, throwing himself down onto the old couch.

"Yeah. What about it?" Harry asked. He flopped down into the chair while Tonks hopped up onto its arm.

"I went to Poppy to ask about it. We talked for awhile before it hit me. I knew what it was. I've only smelled it once before in my life - it was enough to leave an impression on me." Solieyu said.

"This isn't going to be good news, is it?" Tonks said.

"Not at all." Solieyu replied, a grim smile forming.

"So what was it?" Asked Harry.

"Holy water." Solieyu growled.

The other two blinked. Solieyu, noticing that they weren't going to comment, continued, "You two *do* know what it does to vampires, right?"

"Burns 'em." Tonks said. "Even I know that."

"Yes. Well, as I said, I've only smelled it once before, but it was enough. I was visiting my grandfather when I was young. I had been cursed for only a short time at that point. Mother and Father remained at home. I often went to see my grandparents, but as my grandmother had died not long before that trip, I felt I should spend more time with my grandfather." Solieyu began, bringing a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose.

"...On my last night there, someone broke into the house. Grandfather was still awake - he didn't sleep well after grandmother died. I smelt the blood before I actually knew what was happening. I

ran out to see him fighting with a man dressed in grey. I didn't know who it was or what he wanted, but I couldn't let him kill my grandfather. I wasn't old enough to really understand my powers - just that I was dangerous and had a mean bite.

"I charged at him. He shoved grandfather down and quickly took a bottle from inside his long jacket. He slung the contents out at me. My grandfather barely jerked me to the ground in time to avoid most of it. It was holy water. It got through parts of my pajamas and started eating away at the skin on my left shoulder and the back of my neck. I'm not sure what happened after that. I blacked out from the pain. I had never felt anything that hurt so much. When I woke up, the man was dead and somehow, grandfather had healed me."

"Ever find out who the guy was? Was he just some random hero who caught wind that you were a vampire?" Asked Harry.

"No. We were very quiet about it. I had doubts even grandfather knew until a few days after I arrived. As for the man... yes, I did. He was from Iscariot." Solieyu said, eyes narrowing.

"Iscawhat?" Tonks said, frowning.

"Iscariot." Solieyu repeated. "No surprise you don't know of it. Most don't. That's how they work. They operate out of the Vatican, sent to track down and kill dark creatures. I'm not sure how they caught wind of me being at my grandparents' house... nor do I know how my grandfather managed to kill the guy. He wouldn't tell me... and he died two weeks later."

"So... what, you're worried that girl is working for that group?" Harry asked, brow creasing.

"Call me paranoid, but that's what I feel. Her righteous justice might be why she got into Gryffindor - being brave for the sake of who she feels are the 'good guys' or whatever." Solieyu said. "If she's wearing anything to symbolize her religion, it will only further my paranoia."

"Wonderful. So there might be a holy warrior in our midst. Just what we need." Tonks said, groaning.

"Indeed. I hope it is just paranoia I'm experiencing. I pray so, anyway." Solieyu murmured. "But my being here poses a serious risk to my family. I've already spoken with Dumbledore, who's agreed to hide my mother somewhere he swears is secret, and that's helped ease my worry. I can't imagine why Iscariot would send someone here, though. How would they *know*?"

"Maybe they're just being cautious?" Harry suggested. "It isn't exactly secret what's gone on here for the past three years. It wouldn't surprise me if they sent a scout to case the area, see if the rumors were true."

"Perhaps." Solieyu said. Then, letting out an annoyed sigh, he got to his feet. "Come on, I've killed enough of your time. We're going to be late to that bastard's first class."

Wincing, Harry watched as Solieyu let himself out of the room. Looking up at Tonks, he declared, "You'll tell me if my hair starts going grey like Lupin's, won't you?"

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"I seriously don't like that man." Harry stated.

"Me either." Tonks agreed.

"I'm just glad he didn't spill any secrets." Solieyu said, grumbling darkly. "Man, I'm not having a good week."

They had just finished their first class with Mad-Eye Moody, and the Ravenclaws were left in an odd state because of it. Breaking all sorts of rules, he had decided to show the students all three of the Unforgivable Curses. He had then proceeded to make a point of how Harry had been the only person to ever survive the Killing Curse.

Throughout the whole ordeal, Harry kept feeling as though something was odd about the man, though he had no idea what. Whatever it was, it continued to keep his hackles up.

"The Defense position has to be cursed." Harry muttered. "Quirrell had the distinct issue of having Voldemort growing from his head."

Lockhart got eaten by the basilisk. And Lupin got outted because of that *jackass* Snape. We haven't had a single professor last more than a year. And some haven't even made it *that* long."

"Odds are against him, in other words." Solieyu said.

"Exactly."

"Eh, maybe he'll turn out alright. The fact that he's outwardly showing that he's just shy of *insane* kinda helps." Tonks said, shaking her head. "I hate artificial eyes."

"Yeah, that was creepy, too." Harry agreed. "Either of you well versed in regards to those? Apparently, he was able to see out of the back of his head."

"Depends on when he got it. Newer models are more... natural..." Tonks said. "Why his is so frighteningly blue is beyond me. Anyway, they're basically like glasses or contacts, just more... connected to you. You can get them enchanted all sorts of ways. He's probably got some kind of anchorplate in his head so he can freely spin it like that, though, else he's be causing the inside of his socket severe damage..."

"Think I should look into contacts sometime? I've already tried using my Metamorphmagus powers to fix my eyesight, but it was a no-go." Harry said, making a face.

"Yeah, you can't fix stuff like that. I wouldn't be surprised if your scar was unable to change, either. Once we get to more advanced uses, I mean. Y'know, full face and body changes. That kinda stuff. You'll have to find other ways to cover it, I think." Tonks said.

"Lovely."

The rest of the day, thankfully, passed in relative silence. That night, the guests from the other wizarding schools were supposed to be arriving. That alone irritated Harry to no end, and he wasn't shy in vocalizing his annoyance. Fred and George were the only ones who seemed to agree with him on the matter. In fact, they seemed to be

planning a song to tell off their guests. According to Fred, they were going to try breaking out in song after dinner was over with.

"So how does it go?" Harry asked.

"Hm... No, no, it's best to keep this one a surprise." George stated.

"Things like this are always better when you don't know the joke beforehand." Fred agreed.

"Right. Well, I'm heading on into the Great Hall. Whatever happens happens. I won't worry until after our guests arrive." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he headed off.

"Suit yourself!" Fred called after him.

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"So let's recap." Harry murmured. He, along with most of the assembled Hogwarts staff and students, was standing just outside the front doors of the school. Apparently, the other wizarding schools were going to arrive in a flourish. "The Defense professor is most likely off his nut, there might be a vampire hunter sent from the Vatican itself, the damn Triwizard Tournament is more or less officially kicking off tonight, and there are outside unknowns from *two* places invading the school. ...Damn it, I want a nice, normal, quiet year!"

Tonks patted him on the back. "You're Harry Potter. When is anything around you 'normal'?"

"She has a point." Solieyu said, smirking.

"I'm not very fond of either of you." Harry grumped, crossing his arms.

"Oh c'mon, it can't be that bad. We don't *know* that Moody's psychotic. ...Well, okay, he *is*, but... oh, I don't even know how to phrase what I'm thinking."

"And the girl?" Harry asked.

"Well... Yeah, alright, I'll let that one go. She seemed pretty interested in Leon and if he says she smells of holy water..." Tonks trailed off, biting her lower lip.

"I'm likely to somehow get involved in the Tournament since, as you said, I'm Harry Potter." Harry continued, making a face. "Meaning I'll probably almost die a handful of times before the school year ends..."

He got smacked on the arm for that comment. "Stop saying stuff like that!" Tonks exclaimed. "You know I hate it when you do."

"Sorry, Nymmy."

"Ooh, look up there..." Said a disconnected voice from next to Solieyu. Harry and Tonks leaned forward, only to see that Luna Lovegood was standing next to their friend.

"Up there?" Harry repeated, following the blonde's gaze. "...Crap, is that what I think it is?"

"Looks like it." Tonks said, nodding slowly.

"Giant carriage with equally giant horses. Hagrid's going to have a fit." Solieyu said, groaning. "I'd hazard a guess that it's Beauxbatons. Durmstrang is more... dark a school."

"Wonderful." Harry muttered.

The Beauxbatons carriage landed soon enough, with Hagrid positively beaming at the giant animals pulling it. Harry let out a choking noise as the door opened and a woman - and Harry was only barely aware it was a woman - as big as Hagrid stepped out. Dumbledore was quick to greet her, so she must have been the Headmistress of the school. Her students, thankfully, were not as severely large as she was. In fact, they seemed just the opposite. Rather petite and dressed in pale blue robes, the Beauxbatons students consisted entirely of girls.

"What's that younger one doin'?" Tonks whispered to Harry, pointing out a girl several years younger than the rest. She wasn't in the blue

robes of her seniors, instead being covered in a thick coat. She had ahold of the hand of an older girl.

"Probably related to the older one there." Harry whispered back. "...Can't imagine why she came along, though."

Dumbledore, upon request by the headmistress, one Olympe Maxime, escorted the girls into Hogwarts. They seemed to be rather cold. Indeed, their robes didn't seem to be very thick. Certainly not suited for the chilly weather that was present.

"Well that was interesting." Solieyu commented. "I think we should all appreciate the fact that the students aren't as big as their headmistress."

"Wonder why it was nothing but girls, though." Harry said. "Bit odd, isn't it?"

"Not really." Tonks said, shrugging. "There are a few magical schools here and there who only accept one gender or the other. What I wanna know is why the little one was with 'em. She couldn't be old enough to attend."

"Maybe she doesn't have any parents." Luna chimed in. "And didn't want to be left behind."

"Could be." Harry said, nodding slowly. "Anyway... that lot didn't seem very bad. Nice enough, if a bit prissy."

"No warning bells, huh?" Tonks asked, grinning.

"None whatsoever." Harry replied, returning the grin.

"...That'll change soon. Look at the lake." Solieyu said, nudging Harry's arm.

Sure enough, something odd was taking place in the lake. The waters were slowly beginning to swirl about.

"Whirlpool?" Harry murmured, brow creased. "No... What are they, travelling by submarine?"

A submarine would have made more sense than what emerged, at least to Harry. A large, ghostly ship was spit out of the forming whirlpool moments later, causing him to gape. Dumbledore, who had returned only seconds before the ship popped out, was making his way across the grounds.

"There is so much I could point out about how odd and wrong this is..." Harry said, voice quiet.

"Best not to overthink some things, mate." Tonks said, patting him on the back once more.

The Durmstrang students and their headmaster made their way out of and off the ghost ship, meeting up with Dumbledore at the lake's edge. They were dressed in shockingly red robes and various furs. They certainly weren't going to need to go into the school to escape the chilly evening air.

As the new arrivals started up towards the school, a frenzied murmur broke the silence of the crowd. Apparently, one of the students was Viktor Krum, the player who had won Bulgaria the World Cup.

"The hell? He's still in school?!" Harry cried out. "And he was *that* good? ...Oh man. I feel thoroughly inadequate now."

Sure enough, Krum was among the students making their way up to the front doors. As they entered, Dumbledore turned and motioned for the Hogwarts students to follow. But Harry held his group of friends towards the back.

"What's up?" Solieyu asked.

"Their headmaster set off the alarms. Big time." Harry muttered.

"He *is* pretty creepy-looking." Tonks agreed. "But hey, Krum! Who woulda thought, huh?"

"Yeah. I certainly wasn't expecting him to show up." Harry said. "...Well, let's get in, get the introductions over with, and get some food."

"Here here!" Tonks cried.

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"Dumbledore's out of his mind!" Harry exclaimed.

"Obviously." Tonks said. "Took you this long to realize it, eh?"

"At least we know how the Tournament will be set up." Solieyu said.

"Yeah, but that brings a whole new set of worries to mind. You watch - my name will end up in whatever the Goblet of Fire is." Harry said, scowling.

He was leading the group of three (Luna had gone back to Ravenclaw Tower) towards the Nest. In the end, the Durmstrang students were going to be staying with the Slytherins, which didn't surprise Harry in the least. Malfoy certainly had looked happy about it. The girls from Beauxbatons, on the other hand, were stationed way up in Gryffindor Tower.

Tonks grinned, poking Harry in the arm. "So..."

Groaning, Harry shook his head slowly. "I haven't the slightest idea on how to dance."

"I can teach you, then!" Tonks said, smiling. "I took a buncha lessons when I was younger."

"No offense, Nymmy, but I can't picture you twirling about in a frilly dress to slow music." Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

"No offense taken." Tonks said, still smiling. "But the offer stands."

"I'll think about it." Harry said, rolling his eyes. And then, just to direct the conversation away from the newly-announced Yule Ball, he added, "I noticed the twins didn't burst into their song."

"Must have been too busy staring at the girls." Solieyu said. "...One smelled odd, Harry."

"Off? How?" Harry asked, jerking his head to look at Solieyu.

"...Familiar, yet not." Solieyu said, frowning. "I have no idea why. She wasn't a vampire. Or a werewolf. Only I still sense some familiarity. Annoying me quite a bit, too."

"Well great. The one group I think are safe is the one we have a wild card in. I need some damn aspirin." Harry muttered.

The group passed through the secret wall and made their way up the spiralling stairway up to their tower. Harry flopped down on one half of the couch, with Tonks taking the other. Solieyu walked out and leaned on the railing.

"I'm finding us a bigger place." Harry said after a few minutes of silence. "We're getting too big for this one."

"Time for the ravens to leave the nest, huh?" Tonks said.

"Aye. We need somewhere we can move around. Somewhere with... *rooms*. I want a secluded little spot we can *really* escape from. As in, somewhere with facilities and a bedroom, at the very least."

"Think you'll actually be able to find a place like that?" Solieyu asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Shouldn't be too hard. First week back's always slow. I'll head out one night and go wandering for awhile." Harry said. "With any luck, we'll be moved before the night the Goblet gets brought out. We're all a bit better at Transfiguration than we were when we furnished this place, so I daresay we'll be able to make a cozy little area to spend our free time."

"Now you just gotta hope Moody isn't out patrolling the corridors at night. Betcha his eye can see through invisibility cloaks." Tonks said.

"...Oh, dammit all, I didn't even think about that." Harry said, flopping his head back. "I'll bring the Map with me, but I can't imagine it'd help too much. ...And besides, in the larger scheme of things, I don't think me and Leon should be the ones to worry about him."

"What do you mean?"

"If he can see through his head and invisibility cloaks, he can see through clothes." Harry stated.

"What? ...Oh! OH! Oh **EW!** Ewwww... Oh. Why would you even think something like that?" Tonks whined. "That's sick!"

"Sick but probably true." Solieyu muttered.

"...Wonder what blocks magical eyes." Tonks muttered, looking down at her robes.

"In any case, I'm gonna search until I find a place with at least two or three rooms to it. Somewhere we can set up some beds or something. The other guys in the dorm keep talking about Terry." Harry said.

"Just as well." Solieyu said, something gruff in his voice. "I'd rather not be in the same place as that thing."

"How's Luna, anyway?" Tonks asked.

"Hm? Oh, she's as normal as she ever was." Solieyu said.

"Which means completely loony." Harry stated.

"She isn't -- well, okay, she *is* weird. But she's not stupid." Solieyu said, turning around to face his friends.

"Obviously. She's in Ravenclaw." Harry said. "But just because you're in Ravenclaw doesn't mean you *should* be. Terry, remember."

"True. I suppose there will always be a few from each House that don't seem like they belong there." Solieyu said, nodding.

"Think that counts for the Slytherins, too?" Tonks asked.

"Probably. Someone like Malfoy though? No way. He'd follow in his father's footsteps in a heartbeat if he was allowed. But..."

"But? You know a good Slytherin?"

Harry blew out a sigh, thinking back. "Yeah. I can. I think, anyway. It's... really hard to tell sometimes."

"Who is it?" Asked Solieyu.

Harry shook his head. "Isn't important. Anyway, come on - let's get to bed. Today's positively worn me out."

"I'm going to head for Poppy's." Solieyu said. "Been feeling off all blasted night."

"Anything serious?" Tonks asked.

"No. I think it's just all the new scents. I'll get over it. I'm going to talk with her about that one girl from Beauxbatons, though." Solieyu said, pushing himself away from the railing and heading for the trapdoor. "See you two in the morning."

"Later, Leon."

"Night!"

Harry let his eyes slip shut after Solieyu left. Tonks scooted over to lean up against him.

"What's on your mind, Harry?"

"Too much. As usual." Harry said, sighing again.

"C'mon - get some rest. Worry when things happen and not before. Concentrate on finding us a new place to hang out in." Tonks said.

"Yeah... I really hope the school will work with me on this. I swear, it feels as though the school's a living creature sometimes."

"Probably all the magic. It's been standing for a loooong time."

"Our bodies are going to hate us for sleeping up here again." Harry commented a few minutes later.

"Our bodies need to shut up." Tonks murmured, head now tilted over and laying on Harry's right shoulder.

"Just remember that when your neck's complaining all day tomorrow." Harry murmured, a grin on his face.

"Quiet, you."

Chapter 10 – Fire Pit

Almost a week had passed by since the guests from the two other Wizarding schools had arrived. Their presence really had no impact on the day-to-day activities in Hogwarts. They were around for meals and occasionally you might see one of them wandering the grounds, but for the most part, they all stayed put.

Mad-Eye Moody's classes continued to prove an oddity for Harry. He still didn't like the man and still couldn't place why, exactly. He had done a few little tests to see if the old Auror could, in fact, see out of the back of his head. As it turned out, Moody *could* see out of the back of his own head, amongst other things. Harry had put off wandering the castle grounds until he thought he had the old man's nightly schedule down. But Moody didn't seem to *have* one. He would be lurking about Snape's quarters one night and be loitering about the Owlery the next. It was all very irritating, as Harry wasn't about to risk being caught under his cloak.

Solieyu had continued to be edgy around not only Moody but also Demetra, who had yet to exhibit any further interest in the vampire. She was acting the perfect model Gryffindor. He had spent most of his nights in the hospital wing and had already had to take his potion twice. For some reason, his hunger had intensified. Madam Pomfrey had tried to reassure the boy, saying it was just because he was getting older and that, as with most things, his hunger would grow as well. Of course, this did little to lessen the vampire's worry. The nights he didn't spend in the infirmary he spent up in the Nest, pacing around the outside.

Harry gave his friend as much of his worry as he could spare. But that night was the night the Goblet of Fire was to be brought out, and Harry couldn't shake the twisting in the pit of his stomach. Something bad was going to happen. And he was in no hurry to find out what it was.

"This year is off to a bad start." Harry mumbled as he, Tonks, and Solieyu left a Charms class. "And I don't just mean the extra homework they're already piling on us."

"Yeah, everything's taken an odd turn, huh?" Tonks said.

"Personally, I'll call it a good year if I make it to the end of it without losing myself." Solieyu said, voice quiet.

"You'll be fine, Leon." Tonks said, nudging him gently. "Just gotta keep you out of any fights so you don't get all worked up, yeah?"

"Yeah..." Solieyu said, blowing out a long sigh. "Hell and bother, but this is irritating."

"Tell me about it." Harry said, nodding slowly. "And things are only just beginning."

After depositing their bags in the Nest, the three made their way down to the Great Hall for dinner. In under an hour, Harry would either have one more thing to worry about or he'd be able to cross one item off the list. He was, obviously, hoping for the latter. The less insanity around him, the better.

Nonetheless, he found it difficult to eat much of anything. He was feeling nauseous, something mirrored on Solieyu's face. Harry knew it was for an entirely different reason - so much fresh blood around and all - but he still felt glad he wasn't the only one about to have a fit. He knew it was selfish to think that way, but he had earned a little selfishness over the past three years, he reckoned.

Throughout the meal, Tonks alternated between trying to cheer Harry up (and make him eat more) and trying to distract Solieyu. She wasn't doing so well on either front and, eventually, she gave up so she could finish her own meal off.

As promised, after dinner was over with, Dumbledore stood and asked that everyone remained seated. "As I said when our honored guests arrived, we will be bringing out the Goblet of Fire now! This rare artifact will be what ultimately will decide who is the Champion for each school! Anyone who wishes to participate must write their name and school on a piece of paper and place it into the Goblet within the next week. At the end of that week, the Goblet will spit out one name from each school.

"Now, before we bring the Goblet in, I must add some things. First, there is a strict age limit on who may participate! Nobody under the age of seventeen may participate. And to help ensure this, I will be drawing an Age Line around it. This is, of course, for a reason - the Triwizard Tournament is not something to take lightly. There will be great danger involved to each Champion. And once a Champion has been selected, he or she is obliged to see the Tournament through until the very end. Placing your name in constitutes a binding, magical contract of which you may not break. Please be very sure you wish to compete before placing your name into the Goblet."

Naturally, much booing came about when the headmaster spoke of the age limit. But it made perfect sense to Harry - *and* it made him relax a little. He certainly wasn't of age yet. He had read of Age Lines before. Very tricky magic, they were. When Dumbledore stopped speaking, McGonagall (who had been absent) walked in floating an ancient wooden chest in behind her. It was absolutely covered in gems of all kinds. She brought the chest up to Dumbledore, who opened it and pulled out the Goblet itself.

It wasn't as large as Harry was expecting it to be. Dumbledore easily held the object in his hands, though it partially obscured the man. It was wooden as well but, unlike its container, was simple in its design. But the minute Dumbledore placed the Goblet down on top of the chest, blue flames sprang to life from within.

"And now," Said the headmaster, peeking around the Goblet, "you would all do well in going back to your common rooms and thinking about who will compete. Remember - you must be sure that you wish to take part in the Tournament. You cannot have a change of heart after entering."

And that was that. The Great Hall began to empty out as people headed back to their Houses. Harry led his group towards the Nest once they managed to break away from the crowd, which was heatedly discussing who should and shouldn't compete.

"Well, that's one problem outta your hair!" Tonks declared, patting Harry on the back.

"Yeah. Age Lines are practically impossible to get around." Harry said.

"'Practically' being the key word." Solieyu said, not sounding so enthused. "Don't stop worrying just yet. Worry after the Champions are chosen."

"Oh, don't be such a killjoy!" Tonks said, frowning.

"No, he's right." Harry said. "I probably just got myself jinxed somehow. Knowing my luck, I'll be the first name the Goblet spits out. Somehow."

"Would you please think positive for once?" Tonks scowled, swatting Harry on the arm.

"I'll think positively once I'm sure I'm in the clear. Anyway, I wonder what Fred and George are gonna do now. They kept talking about entering the Tournament. But if there's an Age Line, there's a fat chance of that happening." Harry said, smirking.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll try something to get around it." Tonks said, smirking as well.

"Anyway, I think I'm gonna risk it tonight and take a walk around the castle." Harry said once the group had reached the Nest. "Not like I can be banned from Quidditch or anything if I get caught."

"True. I'll probably wait up for you. Or try, at least. No promises." Said Tonks. "Leon, what about you?"

"I think I'm going to stay up here again tonight. I'm feeling a bit better. Better than I have in awhile, anyway. May even take a nap. I do feel pretty tired." Solieyu said, stretching. "Be careful out there, though. Moody's a paranoid head case."

"So I've seen." Harry muttered. "Honestly, what was Dumbledore thinking?"

"Probably that if something tried happening, Moody would jump on it and blow it up before it could start any trouble." Tonks said, eyebrow raised.

"I wouldn't put it past him. Dumbledore isn't exactly right in the head, either." Harry said. "Well, I'm going to go grab the Map and my cloak. Coming with, Nymmy?"

"Don't call me Nymmy. And yeah, I am. Night, Leon!"

"Goodnight, you two. Good luck, Harry." Solieyu said, stretching out on the couch as his friends went down through the trapdoor. "You'll need it."

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It was just as well that Harry was spending the night looking for a new place to roost. He had been having bizarre dreams again. They were almost like the ones he had suffered from back in his second year, only they felt more... real, almost as if he was being reached out to in some sense. His dreams consisted of a pair of beautiful gemstones circling one another. The odd thing was, one of them seemed to cry out, begging Harry to come closer. It almost seemed to be in pain and had a hollow, ghostly voice.

Harry hadn't been able to make out any words - it was all a blurred sort of mumbling. It had appeared to him three times already which, while not entirely odd, was still of concern to him. He rarely had recurring nightmares like that. Not where it was exactly the same.

Moody was, for once, holed up in his own quarters, which made Harry feel immensely more relaxed. He was positive Moody's eye *had* to have a distance limit on it. Harry was walking with his invisibility cloak on, something he hadn't done in seemingly forever, and had the Marauder's Map in his hands. It was nearly midnight, and not many people were out and about. The Prefects occasionally patrolled the halls in an attempt to catch would-be snoggers in the act. And, usually, there was a teacher on duty with them. But tonight was Professor Sprout's turn and she was easy to avoid.

He was searching for a hideout. A certain type of hideout - not just any would do this time. He wanted something bigger. Something with multiple rooms. Something that wasn't a *tower*. He had begun his search on the second floor and had been working his way steadily downward. As far as he knew, the school had three floors of

dungeons, with the lower two being all but off-limits save for one or two storerooms. He was trying to avoid even going to the first level of the dungeons, as that meant being closer to the Slytherins.

It was nearly two hours later that he found what he was looking for. He had just about given up on the first floor, though he had lingered in hopes of perhaps catching something he had missed. He *really* didn't want to get into the dungeons. And, as if giving in to him finally, the Map seemed to light up in one particular spot. It was around a long, mostly-empty corridor that led to somewhere underneath the main staircase. A few of the rooms along the hall had been used in the past for makeshift dueling clubs, none of which ever lasted long, mostly due to the ineptitude of their teachers. Students were absolute rubbish at teaching properly, Harry had decided. And yet, at the same time, he couldn't help but think that they all had to be better than Lockhart ever was.

Harry glanced back at the Map. The shining spot, which was glowing dimmer by the minute, was just ahead and to the right. But, as he drew closer to the spot, the sudden urge to go down to the lake started to overtake him. He had almost given in when the glowing spot on the Map seemed to surge brightly for a moment.

"The hell...?" He muttered, walking towards the spot of empty wall once more. This time, he fought the urge to about-face. Someone had stuck Repelling Charms on it and he wanted to know *why*. The desire to just turn and walk off was nearly overwhelming, but Harry was stubborn and fought it the entire way. He thought he was going to hit the wall but, just as he got through the Repelling Charm, he stumbled forward and fell through it instead.

"Another fake wall. Well, that's promising." Harry said, turning around and staring behind him. "Gonna need to do something about that Charm if there's a jackpot lying in wait, though."

The floor only continued a few feet forward before a descending staircase took over. The Map was entirely useless, though - it was reading him as being *in* the walls of the school. Obviously his father and friends hadn't gotten past the Charm. Which meant that this area

hadn't been seen by anyone other than him in a good, long while. The sheer amount of cobwebs and dust seemed to reinforce this.

Harry pulled off his cloak, draping it over his shoulders as he pulled his wand. A few quick cleaning spells later and he felt better in advancing. He walked down the steps carefully, making sure that, should a tricky stair or two lie in wait, he wouldn't fall victim to it. But the stairs were perfectly safe and he made it to the little landing at the bottom in one piece.

"Gonna need to put some lights up, too." He mumbled, holding his lit wand up. There was a door in front of him. Old and arched, it had a large, circular handle and an engraved portrait of a snake eating its own tail on it.

"Right, now I'm creeped out." Harry said. "An ouroboros, huh? Boris'd get a kick out of the luck."

The little taipan was staying with Tonks for the night, discontent in staying with Harry as he wandered. Mostly because Harry had said that he would probably end up in the cold dungeons. The snake was having none of it and, before Tonks knew what was up, she had a new, spiral bracelet in the form of a snake. Harry had apologized and told Tonks what they had talked about and, in the end, she had agreed to keep track of Boris for the night.

"And you are?" Hissed a voice from nowhere, causing Harry to jump.

"Who's there?" He said, glancing around.

"...On the door, stupid."

Harry blinked, swivelling around to stare at the door. The engraved snake was no longer eating its own tail. Rather, it had turned to stare outwards at Harry.

"You're...alive?" He asked.

"Not as such, no." Replied the snake on the door.

"Then you're like a wizarding photograph. Or a portrait." Harry reasoned.

"More or less." Hissed the snake. "Now - who are you? And what are you doing here?"

"Oh, right. I'm Harry. Harry Potter. And... well, I was just looking for a new place for my friends and I to hang out."

"Hang out." Repeated the snake.

"Uh... yeah. You know - to relax, to have fun. Somewhere away from the other students and the faculty." Harry said.

"Ahh. I would seek another place, then. This den has not been used in a long time. Further back than I have memory, in any case." Hissed the snake.

"I think I should be the judge of that if it's all the same to you." Harry said. "I assume there's a password to get in, though."

"There is."

"Are you able to tell me, or am I going to have to guess my way in?"

The snake's tongue flickered out before it replied. "I have long since forgotten the password once used to gain entrance. However, if you intend to use this place, you may give me a new one to remember."

"Well... okay." Harry said, hoping that he *would* be able to use whatever was beyond the ouroboros door. Even though it wasn't alive, he would still feel bad to just leave the snake alone again. "Leviathan." He finally said. "How's that?"

"Leviathan." Repeated the snake. "As you wish, Harry Potter."

"Ah, that's right - you know my name. What's yours?" He asked.

"I have no name." Said the snake.

"Oh. ...Well, how about the name of the password, then?" Harry suggested.

A moment passed. "Very well. Now then - do you wish to enter?"

"Yes, please." Harry said.

"Then speak my name."

Harry smirked. He seemed to be a magnet for quirky snakes, real or otherwise. "Open, Leviathan."

"As you wish."

Harry took a step back as the old door opened outward, creaking noisily as it did so. Harry made a mental note to fix the creak as well. He stepped through and let the power to his Lumos spell increase so that he could see around better. The room he entered was more long than wide and had a fireplace at the far end. A busted, dust-coated couch sat in disrepair not far in front of it. Two doors were in each side wall, two forward and near the fireplace, two back and near the entrance, all opposite each other.

Stepping into the room, Harry smiled. "Five rooms total. That's a good start..."

The door at the back-left led to a painfully out of date bathroom. It housed a bathtub large enough to make the Prefects jealous. Harry had long since heard tales of how elegant and large *their* bathtubs were. Unfortunately, this one was crusted over in gunk countless ages old and home to a family of nasty-looking spiders.

The door at the back-right led into another long room that was almost completely empty. What looked like an old, collapsed training dummy sat by itself in one corner of the room. Harry's eyes lit up - this was getting better all the time. He could either restore this to a training hall or fix it up into a bedroom!

The door at the front-left led to a smaller room with a table running almost the entire length. There were no chairs around it, but it was clear what the place was. As he made a lap around the room, looking at the table, he let out a chuckle. "I wonder if I'd be able to have meals here. I should go ask Dobby sometime."

A loud **CRACK!** threw Harry off balance. He pressed himself back against the wall and thrust his wand hand out, staring wide-eyed across the room. A house elf with exceeding large eyes (even for house elf standards) was staring back at him. And, once Harry realized who it was, he relaxed.

"Dobby!" He cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Harry Potter has said Dobby's name, sir!" Squeaked the house elf, walking around the table. "So Dobby is coming to see Harry Potter!"

Harry blinked. "Oh, that! I was just wondering to myself if I'd be able to have meals served here. I'm kind of searching for a new place for my friends and I to hang out, and I just found this set of rooms. It's looking awfully good. I had said that I should ask you sometime if it would be possible."

Dobby hopped up onto the table and, after staring at it for a minute, he turned and beamed at Harry. "Oh yes, Harry Potter, sir! This table is like what is in the Great Hall! Dobby can tell the other house elves to include this place for meal times!"

"Really? That'd be great, Dobby!" Harry exclaimed. This place was getting better and better. "But... I dunno if we'd be down here *that* often. Is there a way to... I dunno, be able to eat whenever we'd like? ...That sounds really selfish now that I've said it out loud."

"Oh no no no, sir! That is not any trouble at all!" Dobby argued, walking towards Harry and shaking his head quickly. "House elves love to cook almost more than they is loving to clean! And to cook for Harry Potter and his friends would be a great honor, sir!"

"Really? But... how would we be able to tell you lot when we're here?" Harry asked.

"Dobby can bring in special silverware, Harry Potter, sir! Then when Harry Potter and his friends is wanting to eat, they is simply having to tap the plates and goblets with their wands and speaking what they want!"

Harry's eyebrows raised. "What, just like that? And... and it really wouldn't be any trouble?"

"Oh no, sir! It would be Dobby's honor!"

Harry grinned. "Right, then. Um... I'm not sure when I'll have this place cleaned up, though..."

"That is no problem either, sir. Just be saying Dobby's name and he is appearing!" Said Dobby.

Harry grinned wider. "Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Dobby - this really means a lot to me!"

The house elf tugged his large ears down to cover his face, barely concealing a blush. "The great Harry Potter is thanking such a lowly house elf..."

"Hey, you're not lowly - this *more* than makes up for my second year." Harry said.

It took a few more minutes, but Harry managed to pry Dobby off of him (he had launched at Harry's torso in a Molly Weasley Death Hug) and got him to vanish back to the kitchens. He was then able to head back into the main room and inspect what was through the door at the front-right of the room.

"Excellent." He whispered upon entering. A massive four-poster bed took up a better portion of this new room. Like everything else in the quarters, this had long since started to fall apart. It wasn't something a few spells couldn't fix. And it saved Harry the trouble of attempting to transfigure a sizable bed. The fewer things he had to make that way, the better. He was far better than he had been when he and his friends had jury-rigged furniture for the Nest, but it was still a tricky field of magic to operate in.

Walking back into the main room, he gazed around again, a smile plastered on his face. He had hit the nail on the head in one. This was a perfect new hideout. All he had to do was fix it up to be habitable again. And he needed to dispel that stupid Repelling Charm.

Walking out of the main room, he carefully closed the arched door and turned to face the snake engraved on it once more.

"I heard talking." Said the snake.

"Yeah, a house elf came to... er... visit me while I was looking at the dining hall. This place is better than I could've hoped for." Harry said.

"Does this mean you will be staying?" Asked the snake.

"It does." Harry said, smiling again. "Does this place have a name?"

"I cannot recall."

"...I think I have a good name prepared. I'll mull it over and see if you think it fits when I bring my friends down." Harry said. "...By the way, it's been bothering me - how come you can speak English?"

"I can't."

Harry blinked, frowning. Had he been speaking in Parseltongue without realizing it? It didn't take him long to realize why, of course. He had been slipping in and out of Parseltongue with Boris since before the school year began. Apparently, it had become almost second nature.

"Will my friends still be able to use the password? They can't speak to you like I can." Harry hissed, this time taking note of which language he spoke in.

"They will so long as it is in your language. And before you ask, you did say it in another language."

"Right, so Leviathan it is." Harry said, switching back to English. "Thanks for letting me in then, Levi."

"'Levi'?"

"Well, Leviathan's a bit long." Harry said, shrugging. "I have a snake friend I gave the name 'Ouroboros' to... but that was a bit long as well, so I just call him 'Boris' for short."

"I see..."

"Anyway, thanks for letting me in. I'll be back down here whenever I can, cleaning and adding furniture." Harry said.

"It will be good for this place to have residents again." Hissed the snake, curling back up so that it looked to be eating its tail once more.

Harry smiled at the engraved snake and set up the stairs. He would bring some things down to transfigure over the next few days - but that Repelling Charm was coming down *tonight*.

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"You look like hell. Again. You ever gonna tell us where you've been going after dinner every night?" Tonks asked, three days later.

"I should have the big surprise ready the day before the Goblet thing." Harry panted, flopping back in his chair in the Ravenclaw common room. Even with spending so much time away from his proper living space, the other Ravenclaws allowed the chair to remain his.

"I take it you succeeded, then." Solieyu said.

"Aye. And it's better than I imagined. You're both going to love it. Though I'm not sure what I'm gonna do with one room until I show it to you." Harry said, tilting his head to each side. Both sides produced a painful, yet strangely satisfying pop.

"One room? How many *are* there?" Tonks asked.

"You'll see." Harry chuckled. "Was a right pain to find. The Map said it was there, but I kept getting the urge to bugger off when I got closer. Blasted Repelling Charm. Glad I finally got rid of it..."

"It was *guarded*?" Solieyu asked, eyebrow raised.

"Sort of. But even with it gone, it's through another invisible wall. *AND* it has a password-protected door!" Harry said, grinning. "It was a *wreck* when I found it, but I'm getting it fixed up."

"I hate waiting for things. You know that, right?" Tonks mumbled, nudging Harry in the arm.

He just laughed in response. "I know, Nymmy, I know. Bear with me - it's not going to be much longer."

And indeed it wasn't. Their homework kept them busy most of the time. Harry had finally gotten the new hideout cleaned and fixed up. He had had to consult Professor McGonagall on a few things, which caused the old Transfiguration teacher to eye him suspiciously, but it had all worked out in the end.

And, true to his word, the day before the Goblet was set to spit out the names of the Champions to take place in the Tournament, Harry led his group down to the first floor. After carefully making sure they weren't being followed, Harry took them through the invisible wall and down the short staircase.

"Hullo again, Levi." Harry hissed, smiling at the engraved snake on the door.

"Good evening. Are these your friends?" Replied the snake, uncoiling itself.

"Yup." Harry said. And, switching back to English, he turned to face them. "Sorry. The snake on the door's like one of the portraits. I named him Leviathan... but only after choosing that for the password. I realized the next day that that was kind of stupid, so I changed the password. Anyway, Levi will be able to understand it in English, so don't worry about the language barrier."

"The password being?" Solieyu asked.

"Sectumsempra." Harry said, grinning strangely.

"Isn't that a spell in that awful Potions book you got?" Tonks asked.

"Yup. I ran a test of it the other night. ...I cleaved the practice dummy in two. *Huge* arc of magic flew out of my wand. It was like I slashed the air itself and sent it out to cut the target." Harry explained.

"Sounds... very dangerous." Solieyu commented.

"I'd imagine!" Harry chirped. And then, turning back to the door, he switched back to Parseltongue and said, "Time for the grande opening. Sectumsempra!"

Leviathan hissed and the door opened, squeak-free this time. Tonks and Solieyu goggled when they stepped into the main room. It had been completely changed since Harry had found it. The couch was now whole and severely squishy again. There were reading chairs (and bookshelves to house the items to read) on either side of the entrance. Large, soft rugs covered the otherwise stone floor. Candles in their holders now hung from the walls. And, in addition, several more in floor stands were scattered about the room, a handful near the reading chairs. The fireplace was cleaned up and an inviting fire now danced about in it.

"Harry... this is..." Tonks began, walking around the room. "Wow..."

Harry grinned. "Four rooms, to answer your question from earlier in the week. In addition to the Main Hall here."

Harry managed to pull Tonks away from being awed to show his friends the newly revamped bathroom, which the girl nearly had a fit over. The bathtub had been cleaned and scrubbed until the white, crystal-like substance it had been made from shone anew. The rest of the facilities had also been spruced up, though the immense bathtub was clearly the star of the show.

Up next was the Dining Hall, which had had its silverware delivered by Dobby the previous night. Harry had even tested it to ensure it really did work like the house elf said it would. "This is all thanks to Dobby and a friend of his. Didn't catch her name, but she seemed a bit tipsy. Still, isn't it cool? We can order up anything we'd like whenever we get hungry!"

The dining table itself now sported a quartet of chairs around it, with four more sitting along the back wall, just in case Harry gained a few more close friends in the few years he had left at the school. The table was covered in an elegant tablecloth. A series of ornate candles sat in a circle at the table's center.

"Now then." Harry said, ushering the other two back into the Main Hall. "I'll ask what I wanted to earlier - Leon, do you want a bedroom in here? We've already got one. The other room's not got anything but a few practice dummies in it right now."

"If I want to catch some rest, the couch will be fine enough." Solieyu said. "It isn't like I sleep often. It would be wasted on me."

"And what about Luuuunaaaa?" Tonks asked, her voice singsong.

Solieyu flushed and glared in the opposite direction. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, I bet." Tonks said, grinning like a cheshire cat.

"Right, so I can turn it into a proper training hall? You sure you don't want a bedroom?" Harry asked again.

"I'm sure. The training room would be more useful, anyway." Solieyu replied, giving a nod.

"Excellent. I'll start work on that tomorrow, then." Harry said. "Well, that only leaves the bedroom! Right this way, if you please!"

The four-poster had been restored to its former glory, drawing yet another cry of delight from Tonks. There were now end tables on either side of it, each holding a candle. A pair of dressers sat along one wall, and a pair of desks lined the opposite.

When Tonks was done stretching out on the bed to confirm that it was as soft as it looked, Harry led the two back into the Main Hall. "And that's that. I'm sure we'll go up to the Nest from time to time for fresh air. But all little birds must leave the nest eventually, to seek out a better home. And that's exactly what this is. We can sustain ourselves indefinitely here. We can unwind in the bath, order anything we want whenever we want, practice any sort of spell we fancy, and sleep somewhere devoid of drafts. This is our new home. Tonks, Leon, I'd like to officially welcome you to the Snake Pit."

"The Snake Pit?" Tonks echoed.

"Yes. Boris and Levi thought it up and I agreed with them." Harry said, motioning towards the fireplace. Boris had been curled up on the mantelpiece, coiled around a candle. "It's much darker, despite the lights I've put up. It's close enough to the dungeons to warrant a snakelike name. And hey, the guardian is an ouroboros, I have a snake as a friend, and I speak the language."

"Sound logic, that." Solieyu said, though he had a smirk on his face.

"In any case... this is our new spot to come to." Harry said, flopping down on the couch. "Leon, you can tell Luna whenever you want. And I'm thinking about telling Fred and George, though I *am* a little worried that they might commandeer the Training Room and turn it into some sort of laboratory."

"So give them their own little corner if you want." Tonks said, sitting down to Harry's left. "Set up a desk and some beakers and they'll act like Christmas came early."

Solieyu sat on Harry's other side, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. "I have to admit, that fire feels nice. I'll be much happier napping on this couch than on the one in the Nest."

"And you're *sure* you don't want the spare room?" Harry repeated.

"Positive. Now stop asking." Solieyu replied, grinning.

"Aye aye, sir."

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The next day was the one Harry had been dreading. Thankfully, the restoration of the Snake Pit had kept him sidetracked for most of the week. But now he was mostly done with that - the Training Room still needed to be fixed up properly, after all - and the Goblet seemed to taunt him whenever he passed through the Entrance Hall. Tonks and Solieyu had tried to reassure him that nothing bad would happen.

As expected, the twins had indeed tried to get around the Age Line. They had both ended up with white hair and beards that would give

Dumbledore's a run for its money. And both of Harry's friends pointed this out to him. It helped ease his nerves, but only just.

The night of the announcement, Harry couldn't eat, though he found himself strangely thirsty. When dinner was over, and the food had all vanished, the Goblet was once more brought into the Great Hall. Harry was quite certain his heart was trying to beat its way out of his chest.

Dumbledore rose and made his way around to the front of the staff table. "And now, the moment I'm sure we've all been waiting for!"

As he approached the Goblet, its fire flared up and a small slip of paper shot up into the air. The fire died down as the paper floated lazily into Dumbledore's hand. He gazed down at it for a moment, then looked over towards the Slytherin table. "Durmstrang's Champion is... Viktor Krum!"

Applause rang out, and not just at the Slytherin table. In particular, Ron Weasley seemed to be having a fit over at the Gryffindor table.

Seconds later and another bit of paper burst from the flames. "The Champion for Beauxbatons is... Fleur Delacour!"

And again, applause rang out. And, again, Ron Weasley had an absolute fit.

Once more, the flames came to life as a third piece of paper flew out. "And finally, the Hogwarts Champion is... Cedric Diggory!"

The Hufflepuff table erupted. And, for the first time, Ron Weasley did not.

"The Champions have been selected! And now, the Triwizard Tournament has truly begun! In one month's time, the First Task shall take place! And until that time I--"

But Dumbledore was cut short as the Goblet's fire burned brightly once more. Everyone in the Great Hall, the headmaster included, stopped to stare at it. It was all Harry could do to stare in horror as a

fourth slip of paper shot out of the flames, going higher than the other three had.

"I told you..." He whispered, a lump in his throat. "I *knew* it..."

Dumbledore reached up to grasp the paper from the air, looking down at it for a long time before his head raised, scanned the Ravenclaw table, and came to rest on Harry.

'No!' Harry thought, starting to panic. He wanted to run. He wanted to get up and bolt from the Great Hall. He knew whose name was on that paper. But to run now would make him look guilty. He had been *busy* that week! Even if he had *wanted* to put his stupid name into the stupid Goblet, he wouldn't have had *time* to! Eyes squeezing shut, he heard the headmaster's quiet voice carry throughout the room as though yelled.

"...Harry Potter."

Chapter 11 – Sirius Trouble

"I didn't put my name in the Goblet." Harry stated, eyes narrowing.

"And yet there it was." Replied Snape in a silky tone.

"Indeed it was. And, seeing as how I didn't put it in there myself, it must mean that someone *else* did it." Harry said.

"And you expect us to *believe* that?!" Cried Igor Karkaroff, headmaster for Durmstrang.

"I don't care if you believe it or not!" Harry snapped, glaring at the older man. "I didn't throw my damned name into that Goblet!"

"Language, Harry." Said Dumbledore, stepping up behind the teen and putting a hand on his shoulder. And then, looking up at the assembled group, he continued, "I believe what Mr. Potter has said. The Age Line around the Goblet does not allow anyone under legal age to approach. I believe we have all seen the effects *that* has had."

"And let us be thankful no WEASLEYS have been made Champion." Snape growled quietly.

Ignoring the Potions Master, Dumbledore continued, "Unfortunately, what I said of the Goblet is true - this is a binding contract that cannot be broken until the end of the Tournament." He glanced down. "I am sorry, Harry."

"Not as much as I am." Harry grumbled darkly. "I've had enough excitement at Hogwarts. I don't need to be in some dangerous Tournament."

"And yet that is exactly the position you are in." Said the headmaster. "You can do nothing but roll with the punches, as they say."

"Lovely. Can I go now?" Harry asked, bringing a hand up to rub at the bridge of his nose.

"If no one has any further questions or accusations." Dumbledore said, glancing back up to scan the group.

Harry had been pulled into a room at the back of the Great Hall after his name had flown from the Goblet of Fire. Shortly after, the Champions and the leaders of their schools entered. Then Snape came, all but chewing Harry out directly. He wasn't having a very good night.

"Very well. Yes, Harry, you may go." Dumbledore said, patting his shoulder.

And go he did. Storming from the room, he went swiftly back across the still-packed Great Hall, sending a venomous glance towards the Slytherin table as though daring them to try and hex him. He also had to send a glare towards the Hufflepuff table, as they felt their House had been screwed over.

As he passed by his friends at the Ravenclaw table, Harry growled, "Pit. Now."

Tonks and Solieyu were quick to follow after him. They acted as lookouts to ensure that they weren't being followed, as Harry certainly wasn't doing a very good job of it. When they had made their way into the Snake Pit, Harry started yelling.

"I didn't put my damn name into the Goblet! You two *know* I didn't put my name into the Goblet! Damn it all, I don't *want* to be in the Tournament! I do a good job staying alive just *being* at Hogwarts! I don't need *added* dangers! I *knew* something was going to happen! I **knew** my name would end up in there somehow! And now I'm going to hunt down whoever *did* put my name in there, pin them to the wall with Bolts, and blow their bits off with the Eximo!"

"Impressive for one breath." Tonks said, her voice quiet. She approached the now-panting Harry and pulled him into a hug. "Deep breaths, mate."

"We know you're innocent." Solieyu said, walking over. "But I'm afraid this will end up being like the Heir of Slytherin nonsense again."

"Wonderful." Harry growled. "If you two don't mind, I'm going to go drown myself in the tub."

"No drowning." Tonks said, still attached to Harry, despite his attempts to break out of her hug.

"I think," Solieyu said, gazing towards the fireplace. "That a meeting is in order. The more of us searching, the better, right? I'll go collect Luna and the twins."

"Fine." Harry said. But then, before Solieyu could make it out of the Main Hall, he called, "And bring Parkinson!"

"Pansy Parkinson?" Solieyu asked, looking over his shoulder. "Why? She's a Slytherin."

"Exactly why I want her here. She's a confused bint but she's trustworthy. I want to cover all the bases I can here." Harry said. "I want someone on the inside."

"How do you know she won't tell the rest of her House about the Pit?" Tonks asked, finally releasing her grip on her friend.

"She won't." Harry stated. "Trust me."

"Your call." Solieyu said. "But I'm not begging her."

"Fair enough." Harry said.

As Solieyu left, Harry walked over to the couch and flung himself back on it, sighing. "Damn it all, why do I have to have all the crappy luck?"

"You're the hero." Tonks said, sitting next to him.

"So I am." Harry said, eyes slipping shut. "Are you sure I can't go drown myself?"

"No drowning." Tonks said, swatting him on the arm.

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Tonks left a few minutes before Solieyu returned to get the spare chairs set up around the dining table, as well as to ask Dobby about

dinner options. Harry had his arms sprawled out along the back of the couch and was staring up at the ceiling when Solieyu re-entered.

"Welcome back." Harry said. "How many did you bring?"

"All four." Solieyu stated.

"And you weren't followed?"

"It took awhile to get out of the Great Hall, as Malfoy didn't seem keen on letting Parkinson go off with a pair of Ravenclaws and Gryffindors, but we've had no problems since."

"Good." Harry said, getting to his feet and turning. "I'll tell you four this once and once alone - you tell no one of this location. You tell no one of the door's password. As far as the rest of this school - staff and students - is concerned, the Snake Pit does not exist. Understand?"

"What a perfectly horrible name." Fred stated.

"Very roomy, though." George added, glancing around.

"Hey, Harry, everything's all set! Oh, they're back. Good!" Tonks said, coming from the Dining Hall. "We can get started anytime."

"Good. Everyone, if you'd be so kind as to follow us." Harry said, turning to head into the Dining Hall with Tonks. The others, led by Solieyu, followed after them.

"Oh, how cozy." Luna cooed as soon as she entered the small room. "You've got your own place to eat."

One chair sat at either end of the table, with three on either side. Harry took the lone seat at the far end. Tonks and the twins sat to his right, and Luna, Solieyu, and Pansy took up the other side.

"Tap your plate and goblet and state what you want. The house elves will make it for you. But I'd prefer we get down to business first." Harry said, arms crossed.

"Oh, you're joking! This is just like the Great Hall but customizable?" Fred asked, grinning.

"Can't wait to see what's in the other rooms." George said, nodding solemnly.

"You'd better have a good reason for dragging me here, Potter." Pansy muttered.

"I didn't put my name into the Goblet." Harry stated. "I was busy fixing this place up all week. In addition, I seem to be fighting *some* kind of horrible monster every year - I've got all the excitement in life that I *need* . I certainly didn't want to be a part of *this*. Unfortunately, as Dumbledore said, I have no choice in the matter. Now that I'm in, I'm *in*. I can't back out."

"And you want to know who *did* put your name in." Luna said.

"Exactly."

"Any leads?" Asked George.

"Not a one. For my money, I'll go ahead and blame Mad-Eye Moody. If you lot haven't noticed, the Defense position seems to be cursed." Harry said.

"You think the old bastard would do something like that?" Solieyu asked. "Why? Barring that he's completely off his nut, of course."

"Who else would do it?" Harry asked. "Pansy - have any of the Slytherins talked about doing something like this?"

Pansy shrugged. "Not that I've heard. And I'm sure Draco would have gloated about it by now if they had."

"Then it's settled." Harry said. "Who else would have done it?"

"There are unkind people in *other* Houses, you know." Pansy said, glaring down the table at Harry.

"Well aware of that." Harry said. "But unless *you* have a lead on who might have done it, I'm sticking with my guess."

There was silence after that. Harry seemed to be running over a million things mentally, as his eyes unfocused for awhile. When he looked back up, he said, "I want you all to help keep an eye out for anything that seems out of place. I have a sinking feeling I'll need to watch my back more than usual this year. If I'm going to be stuck dealing with that damned Tournament, I'm going to beat the hell out of the other three in whatever we get stuck doing. If I'm in it, I'm in it to *win*."

"What makes you think you can trust me?" Pansy asked.

Harry smirked. "Because, for whatever reason, you have this weird fixation with me. I'll take the risk. Something tells me I can trust you, Parkinson. The same thing that tells me Moody is completely crazy and that damn near everyone from Durmstrang is evil."

"Even Krum?" Tonks asked.

"Even Krum." Harry said.

"So now what?" Solieyu asked.

"Now? ...Now, we go about our business as normal. We let no one on to the fact that we suspect any foul play. Let alone by a staff member. We wait until Moody slips up somewhere. By letting you four in here, I'm putting my trust in you that you'll have my back when I need you to. But I won't try and force anyone. If any of you feel, for whatever reasons, that you won't be there if anything should happen, you're free to leave."

Harry's eyes darted to Pansy as he finished speaking. But she didn't stand. Nor did any of the other three. Nodding slowly as he glanced around, Harry finally broke a smile, albeit a faint one. "Thank you. All of you."

"I suppose we're doing this out of the goodness of our hearts." Pansy said, smirking at Harry.

"That and use of the Pit if you need it." Harry said.

"And why, exactly, would I want to purposely hang around *here*?"
Asked the Slytherin.

"Front-left door upon entering from outside. Go look." Harry said in a monotone.

Pansy narrowed her eyes, but got up. A moment later an odd noise filled the air. When she returned, she was staring with her mouth open. "Good LORD, Potter. What are you planning with a bathtub that enormous?! Communal bathing?"

Harry choked. "What? No!"

"Then why is it so *big*?" Pansy asked, flailing her arms slightly.

"Why *not*?" Harry replied. "Haven't you heard stories of the Prefect's bathroom?"

"Well yeah, but still!"

"Parkinson, this is a safe haven away from the rest of the school. There's one bedroom, a training hall, this dining room, that bathroom, and then the Main Hall. The house elves can serve food directly - anything you want at any *time* you want. If you ever need to escape from reality for awhile, you're not going to find a better place on the grounds." Harry said.

There was a pause, and Harry could see Pansy cycling through things in her mind. Finally, she let out a sigh and reclaimed her spot at the table. "You're all out of your mind. I'd like that to be perfectly clear."

"We love you too." Fred said, making a kissy face at the Slytherin, who recoiled in horror at the sight.

"Right. I dunno about the rest of you, but my appetite is back. I couldn't eat tonight because I bloody *knew* my name was going to somehow wind up coming out of the stupid Goblet. And it's caught up with me." Harry said. And, tapping his plate and goblet, he started

ordering up. His food arrived in almost no time at all, which caused him to finally smile properly.

"Dig in, kids." Harry said, raising his goblet of butterbeer up. "Here's to another interesting year at Hogwarts, whatever it may bring."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Solieyu escorted the guests out of the Pit not long after their little meal had ended. Harry had a short conversation with Leviathan about who the newcomers were and that they were probably likely to come and go at all hours. The little snake seemed to be happy that the quarters it guarded was becoming so popular.

Before he left, Solieyu had whispered to Harry that he was planning to head up to the hospital wing that night and that he likely wouldn't return. Harry nodded and wished his friend well.

When everyone was gone, Harry and Tonks went back inside. Harry groaned and stretched as he headed towards the bedroom. "I think I'm going to write to Sirius."

"How come?" Tonks asked, trailing after him.

Moving to sit at one of the desks, Harry pulled out a quill and some parchment. "Just because I need some advice on this whole mess. That and I'd just honestly like to have some comforting words from a family member."

Tonks sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Harry quickly scribbled out what he was thinking. "Aren't you worried he might try coming back?"

Harry paused. "Crap, you're right. Okay, so I'll add a PS for him *not* to return and that I just needed to get some stuff off my chest."

"And you think that'll stop him?" Tonks asked, grinning now.

"...Damn, you're right. ...Hey, I wonder if we can ask Dumbledore to connect our fireplace to his. If Sirius DID come, he could stay down here. He might have to stay in dog form, but I don't think he'd mind,

so long as he got a good bath in and something nice to eat." Harry said.

"Our very own guard dog, huh?"

"Something like that!"

Tonks giggled. "Well... I wouldn't mind seeing him again. You said he looked loads better, right?"

"Yeah. He had gotten himself a proper shave and some decent robes. Looked less scruffy. Anyway, I'm gonna head up to the Owlery and send Hedwig off with this. What've you got planned?"

"I think I'll use the time to break in that bathtub." Tonks said, eyes gleaming.

"You'd better wait on that." Harry said, smiling. "We haven't transferred the stuff in our trunks down here. There are bathrobes, but I doubt you'd want to sleep in one."

"Ah, crap. Okay, well, I'll go and transfer my clothes and stuff down here *then* take a bath!" Tonks said, getting to her feet.

"Fair enough. I'll probably transfer my stuff down tomorrow. I feel right exhausted, despite having not *done* much today." Harry said, making a face.

"Gonna sleep in your robes tonight?" Asked Tonks, following Harry as he went back into the Main Hall.

"Probably. I may sit up and talk to Boris for awhile if I can wake him up." Harry said, turning to glare towards the fireplace. "He's turned into a part of the scenary, it seems."

"*Shove off.*" Muttered the taipan, who was still lazily coiled up.

"*Shove off yourself, you cheeky bastard.*" Harry said back. "Anyway, I'm gonna head off. See you in a bit!"

"Have fun with the climb." Tonks called after him.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry was muttering darkly under his breath when he finally got back to the Pit an hour later. Things had been going perfectly fine - he had made his way up to the Owlery without running into any problems. But then Peeves had crossed his path en route back to the Pit. It had, possibly, been the most epic dodging match in Hogwarts' history. Knowing full well that, at some point, he would end up drenched via water balloons, Harry took off at top speed towards Ravenclaw Tower. His plan to *not* bring his trunk down had been derailed.

He had made it into the Tower, with Walter's portrait quickly opening for him once he realized what was happening.

Panting, he leisurely made his way to the fourth year boys' dorm, and collected his trunk. As it had a couple of important things to him, he needed to bring the whole thing down rather than to just transfer his clothes. Shrinking the trunk down, he stuck it in his pants pocket and headed back into the common room.

"Fair warning - no one should go out for awhile. Peeves chased me here. It should be okay in a few minutes. I have a feeling he'll continue after me once I leave." Harry said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

And then, before anyone could question him on anything, he had gone. Sure enough, he had to duck quickly back in to avoid the obvious first shot Peeves had thrown at him. But years of being chased had left Harry quick on his feet and prone to instinctively dodging anything that was thrown at him.

Sadly, Peeves had taken a shortcut and Harry hadn't been anticipating that. Just as he got to the first floor, Peeves appeared out of nowhere and pegged him dead in the face with a larger-than-normal water balloon. On the up side, it had seemed to satisfy the poltergeist enough to get him to seek out other targets.

Tonks, who had long since collected her trunk, bathed, and changed into her pajamas, came walking out of the bedroom. "Oh jeez, what happened to you?"

"Peeves!" Harry cried, stomping towards the bedroom. "He chased me from the Owlery to Ravenclaw Tower and then damn near the whole way back *here*. Think I'm gonna have a bath after all."

"That tub is amazing." Tonks said, eyes twinkling. "The water is full of scented bubbles, it's awesome!"

"Lovely. I'll come out smelling of roses and spring air." Harry said, voice dull. Stepping into the bedroom, he pulled his shrunk trunk out of his pocket and returned it to normal size, floating it to sit at the end of the bed.

"Thought you weren't transferring stuff." Tonks said.

"Once Peeves was onto me, I knew I'd end up getting wet. Figured I might as well. Besides, I haven't felt right leaving my cloak and the shard of the Stone unchecked in the dorm." Harry explained.

"Oh yeah... Forgot you had that in there." Tonks said, blinking.

Rummaging around for a spare set of clothes, Harry made his way back across the Pit and into the bathroom. He emerged some twenty minutes later, feeling much less snarky. "You were right." He said to Tonks, who was on the couch. "That tub was very nice."

"Toldja so." Tonks said, grinning. "So what now?"

"Now... I think I'm gonna turn in." Harry said. "I was tired *before* I left for the Owlery. I'm barely standing now."

"Awww, poor Harry." Tonks said, standing and bounding over to him. "Come on, then."

Rolling his eyes, Harry allowed himself to be steered into the bedroom by the shoulders. He had only been on the bed once that week - to test it after fixing it back up. It had felt nice then, but now it was downright heavenly. He groaned as he stretched out on his back. "Urg... you may have trouble dragging me out of this tomorrow morning."

Crawling in next to him and laying on her side, Tonks replied, "I'll tickle you to death if you try skipping a day."

"Gah! No tickling! Evil wench."

"*Who's* a wench?" Tonks asked, bopping Harry on the arm.

"You are!" Harry declared.

"You know, I *can* think of worse ways to wake you up than merely *tickling* you." Tonks said, a threatening tone to her voice.

Harry eyed the girl for a second. She *had* come up with some of the more devious things on The List. Did he really want to push his luck? "Yes, yes, very well" He finally said. "Let's just get some rest, huh?"

Tonks scooted closer so she could curl up against Harry, draping an arm across his chest and making him light up like a Christmas tree. "Sounds good to me!"

'Erk. Not exactly what I was planning...' Harry thought. *'Still...'*

His eyes slipped shut and he smiled. And, somewhere in the depths of his mind, a plan began to formulate. Slowly at first, but as he thought of more and more parts, they seemed to slide into place without a problem. The only problem was that it ended up begin a very intricate plan. Intricate plans tended to screw up more often than not. And it just wouldn't do to have something like his end up badly.

He was going to need to talk to Hermione.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Tonks groaned quietly as she woke up. Why did sleep have to end? Sleep was ever-so-nice and she was not a morning person unless she was feeling hungry. Having eaten so close to bedtime the previous night, she just wasn't feeling it yet. And without hunger driving her to become active, she would have been perfectly happy with going back to sleep. And Harry certainly wasn't helping matters, what with him stroking her hair and all.

"Morning, Nymmy." He whispered.

"Morning..." Tonks replied, voice quiet. "...Stop that. I'll end up going back to sleep."

"You've slept almost half the morning already." Harry said, grinning. "I was wondering if you were ever planning to wake up. You sure you want me to stop?"

"No. But if you don't, I'll never want to drag myself out of bed." Tonks mumbled.

"Fair enough." Harry said, his hand flopping back down. "We've got classes in an hour."

"Snape can jump into the lake." Tonks said, pouting as she forced herself to sit up.

"I would pay good money to see the giant squid lob Snape clean to the Whomping Willow." Harry said in a wistful tone. "But we can't always have what we want. I'll go change in the other room if you'd like."

"Kay." Came Tonks' sleepy reply.

Harry chuckled, rolling out of bed and grabbing a handful of school clothes from his trunk. He would need to get those all into the dresser at some point. He had just been too out of it the previous night. "Don't fall back asleep!"

"I won't, I won't!" Tonks cried, glaring at Harry. "Go 'way."

"Yes, ma'am!" Harry said, chuckling as he entered the Main Hall. Casting a spell on the front door to keep it locked while he was changing, Harry quickly switched clothes. He was unlocking the door again when Tonks made her way out.

"Want to eat down here or head up to the Great Hall?" Harry asked.

"Here." Tonks said, rubbing at her eyes. "I need... coffee."

Ten minutes later, with Tonks finally good and awake, the two left the Pit. They had a bit of time before the Potions class started, so they figured they'd hunt Solieyu down. He wasn't hard to find, as he and the Gryffindor girl he had been worried about seemed to be locked in battle in the Entrance Hall.

Harry barely ducked a wayward spell as they entered the area. "Whoa! Holy crap, what's going on?!"

"Demetra opened fire on him!" Said Ron Weasley, running up to the two. "No idea why, either!"

"What?! Dammit, I knew she was gonna be a problem." Harry said, scowling. "Why isn't anyone jumping in?"

"Well Percy *tried*, but he got blasted in the backside for his trouble." Ron said, looking as if he didn't mind this fact in the slightest.

"Hell. And I was having such a good morning, too." Harry muttered. "Lesse if this clears the road - ***EXPECTO PATRONUM!***"

The giant, silver basilisk shot from the tip of his wand, scattering students left and right. It slammed itself down between the two combatants and, in effect, brought the whole area to a halt.

"Now that I have your attention..." Harry began, not sounding very amused. "Perhaps we'd like to break this little battle up. You okay over there, Leon?"

"Never been better." Solieyu growled. But Harry knew that tone. He had heard it once before, and it wasn't a good sign.

"Tonks, I'll distract the Gryffindor. Get Leon up to Madam Pomfrey, *quick*." Harry hissed.

"Right." Said the girl, taking off towards the vampire.

The Gryffindor girl turned towards Harry, glaring openly at him. "You have no right to stop this fight!"

"I have every right to stop it!" Harry growled. "Leon's my friend! I'm not going to stand by while people try to blow him up!"

"Your *friend*, is he? Are you sure of that?" Asked Demetra, a feral grin on her face.

"Positive." Harry stated, his eyes boring into Demetra's, whose grin faltered for the briefest of moments.

"Then you know." Stated the girl, narrowing her eyes.

"I know. And I don't care." Harry replied.

Everyone watching the back and forth looked thoroughly confused by this exchange. And, after another minute's worth of staring each other down, Demetra put her wand away and turned to enter the Great Hall. As she left, Harry dispelled his Patronus and turned to head towards the hospital wing.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

When he arrived, it was to a mostly-empty room. Tonks was standing outside Madam Pomfrey's office, looking bored. When she spotted Harry, her eyes lit up and she ran up to him.

"How did it go?" She asked.

"As well as it could. She knows, though. And she stated more than asked if I did, as well. I said I did and she left. No one worked out what the hell either of us meant, and that's fine by me. How's Leon doing?" Harry asked.

"Madam Pomfrey's got him holed up in there." Tonks said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. "Probably pouring the potion down his throat and calming him down. Wonder what she did to get him that fired up."

"Dunno. But it's one more thing to worry about." Harry sighed, running a hand back through his hair. "I'm never gonna make it through this year. I'll either die or go crazy. Possibly one before the other."

"Maybe you'll become possessed by a Screaming Banderswitch and try eating toadstools." Came a voice from the doorway.

Harry and Tonks jumped, both spinning to see Luna Lovegood standing there.

"Is Solieyu okay?" She asked, the cloudiness in her eyes clearing for an instant.

"Uh... yeah. Madam Pomfrey's just making sure he didn't suffer any injuries." Tonks said quickly, plastering a fake smile on her face.

"Ohh, that's good." Luna said. "I'd rather have Solieyu come away with a few cuts and scrapes than for him to be exposed."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Uh... what do you mean?"

Luna tilted her head as she looked from Harry to Tonks and back again. "You said you knew."

"Uh..."

"It's alright." Came Solieyu's voice from behind them. He and Madam Pomfrey were stepping out of her office. "She knows too."

"She does? Since when?" Tonks asked.

"Oh, I've always known." Luna said, walking towards Solieyu. "He never ate and he seemed to disappear regularly."

"She trailed me." Solieyu said, shrugging.

"Wh... hey, I trailed you too! How'd she manage to succeed?!" Harry cried.

"She's obviously a better tracker." Tonks said, grinning.

As Harry sputtered indignantly, Luna put her hand on Solieyu's shoulder and asked, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." He replied. But he didn't look it. He was panting slightly and his eyes were badly bloodshot and sunken. It looked almost as if he had been awake for a week.

"Honestly, what was that girl thinking?" Gripe Madam Pomfrey, who was watching Solieyu carefully.

"I'd prefer to know what Dumbledore's thinking, letting her stay here." Harry said. "I don't suppose it's possible to see if she *is* from Iscariot, huh?"

"Their agents are all but impossible to detect unless they want to be." Solieyu muttered.

"With the way she acted today, she must not be very worried about her identity being let out." Tonks said darkly.

"She didn't outright call him a vampire, though." Said Luna, who was still gazing at Solieyu. "That has to count for something."

"Yeah. That was strange." Harry agreed. "...Ugh. This is no good. There's enough madness in this school this year."

"Finally we agree on something, Mr. Potter." Said Madam Pomfrey. "I recommend getting Mr. Reinhardt back to his bed. He needs to sleep. And I do mean *SLEEP*."

"I'll be *FINE*." Solieyu argued through gritted teeth, lowering his head.

"Yes, you will - after you sleep." Madam Pomfrey said.

"I'll make sure he sleeps." Luna said, smiling pleasantly.

"You'll miss your classes." Tonks pointed out.

"All I have today is Transfiguration." Luna replied. "And I can catch up on that."

"You don't need to watch over me." Solieyu muttered.

"I know I don't *need* to." Luna said, latching onto Solieyu's right arm.

"We'll make sure he gets what he needs." Harry said, nodding to Madam Pomfrey.

"See that you do. He seems not to want to listen very well these days." Replied the matron, who turned and headed back to her office, muttering under her breath about kids these days.

"Go ahead and take him to the Pit, Luna." Harry said. "Me and Tonks need to get down to the dungeons. I don't feel like being chewed out by that greasy-haired git this early in the day."

And that was the end of that. Luna led Solieyu back towards the Snake Pit and Harry and Tonks split from the group to continue on down to the dungeons for their Potions class.

"She's good for him." Tonks said quietly as they walked.

"Yeah. I think he'll be alright as long as she keeps close." Harry said, nodding.

"...Bets on what'll be up when we get back there?"

"I'm saying he'll be out like a light on the couch with his head on her lap. You?"

"Same."

"Bonus points if she's putting little ribbons in his hair." Harry said.

It took a minute for the mental image to set in. But when it did, Tonks started laughing.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Unfortunately, Fate decided to be a jerk to Harry that morning. He and Tonks did make it to class in time and were spared a dressing down by Snape, but it wasn't to last long. Halfway through, there came a knock at the door.

Snape, irritated that someone would dare interrupt his class, barked, "Who is it?"

The door opened and in peeked the face of a frightened-looking first year. "I-I'm here for Harry Potter, sir."

"Here for Potter." Echoed Snape.

"Y-yes, sir. They... they need him for the Weighing of the Wands. For... for the--"

"I *know* what it's for!" Snape exclaimed. "Potter! You heard him. Get your things and go!"

"Yes, sir." Harry muttered. He knew he'd end up being chewed out for this later, despite it being out of his hands. Snape was just like that. Gathering up his supplies and whispering a goodbye to Tonks, he followed the first year out into the hall, closing the door gently behind them.

"He's scary." Said the first year as they walked.

"You have no idea. What's your name?" Harry asked.

"Locket. Locket Wolf..." Said the first year.

"Interesting name. I seem to meet lots of people with interesting names." Harry replied, smirking.

"I don't like it much. Locket sounds girly." Said Locket, scowling at the floor.

"Shorten it to Lock, then?" Harry suggested.

"Lock isn't much better."

"Gotta compromise somewhere." Harry said. "So where are we going?"

"It's happening in an empty classroom just off the second floor's east hallway." Said Locket.

"I should be able to find it, then. You get wrangled into this?"

"Yeah."

Harry chuckled. "Figures. Well, thanks for getting me away from Snape, in any case."

"Sure. Good luck."

Harry watched the first year rushing off in the direction of Hufflepuff's common room. "I think I'm the only person to like their first name." He said to no one, continuing on towards the second floor.

It didn't take long to find the classroom in question. Lots of noise was coming from inside. Harry was careful to open the door to ensure no random spells were flying his way before he walked in properly.

The other three Champions had already arrived. Krum was in a corner of the room, trying to blend in with the shadows. Fleur was over by a window, gazing out over the school ground. And Cedric was being fussed over by Mr. Ollivander, who seemed to be criticizing the Hufflepuff on the somewhat haggard-looking wand.

"Tsk tsks. Already scuffed and nicked. What have you been using this for, boy?" Ollivander cried, shaking his head in dismay.

And in another corner of the room, near a broom closet, was a blonde-haired woman wearing spectacles. Harry's warning sirens immediately began going off when she turned to look at him. Her eyes lit up and her lips curled into an unpleasant smile. Next to her was a dumpy-looking photographer who looked for the life of him that he would rather be snogging a manticore.

"Ahh, the Fourth is here!" Coos the woman, walking over to Harry. "Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet."

"Uh... nice to meet you..." Harry replied, stepping back.

"Potter? Ahh, yes. Have you been taking care of *your* wand?" Asked Ollivander, handing Cedric's back to him and stepping closer.

"Best as I've been able, all things considered." Harry said. "It takes time to see it?"

"Yes, yes. Must ensure the Champions' wands are in working condition before the First Task." Said Ollivander.

Harry drew his wand from his robes and handed it over to the energetic old man. After fawning over its details for a minute, he conjured a wine glass then filled it up, all using Harry's wand. He shook the glass of wine around before taking a sip of it. And, after smacking his lips, he smiled and held the wand back out. "In fine condition indeed. Good show, Potter."

"Thanks." Harry said, pocketing his wand again. "Uh, if that's all..."

Ollivander seemed like he was going to reply, but quickly got cut off by Skeeter, who smiled her unpleasant smile at Harry again. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to ask you some questions."

"What kind of questions?" Harry asked, only briefly noting that Ollivander glared at Skeeter before turning and heading for Fleur.

"Oh, just simple things, really." Skeeter said. "Things relating to your place in the Tournament, that kind of thing. People are dying to know how you got in."

"Word spreads quickly, I see." Harry said, eyes narrowing. "Well, it doesn't matter. I didn't put my name in the Goblet. And I've no idea who did. Wouldn't make for a very good story."

"Hmm." Skeeter said, lips pursed. Then she grinned and tried to pull Harry aside, heading towards the broom closet. "But the readers would just love knowing your thoughts on other things as well, Harry."

"I'd let go if I were you. You're making him mad." Harry suddenly said, digging his shoe into the stone floor to halt his forced momentum.

"Making who mad, dear?" Asked Skeeter.

"*Me, you galling tart.*" Came an irritated hiss from around Harry's left shoulder. The noise caused Skeeter to jump back and stare at Harry.

"What was that...?" She asked.

"My snake." Harry replied. "You were all but crushing him."

Boris peeked his head out through the collar on Harry's shirt, tongue flicking around as he looked about the room. "*She stinks of perfume.*"

"*Yeah.*" Harry replied, switching to Parseltongue. "*And she's sending off the ol' warning signs in my head. Think I'm gonna try getting outta this.*"

"*I'd be more than pleased if you would. I **WAS** enjoying a nice nap.*" Boris hissed.

When Harry looked up, everyone in the room, Ollivander included, was staring at him through wide eyes. He raised an eyebrow and asked, "What?"

"You... were you speaking to that snake, Potter?" Asked Ollivander.

"Not the first time it's happened." Cedric muttered.

"Yeah. So what?" Harry said, frowning. "Boris is my friend. And he didn't appreciate being smashed."

"That's very... interesting, Harry." Said Rita Skeeter, trying to recover quickly. "Now, on to those questions..."

"Not sure I'd want to answer anything you might ask." Harry stated. "Not with that quill."

He had seen Quick Quotes Quills before, mostly while browsing a quill-related catalogue. He was trying to hunt down a place that he could easily get Sugar Quills from. Sneaking into Hogsmeade all the time was getting annoying.

"I have others." Said Skeeter.

"I'll pass." Harry said. And then, switching back to Parseltongue, he glanced down at Boris and added, "*Want to go down to the Pit?*"

"*Waaaarmth.*" Boris purred, causing Harry to laugh.

"Harry, wait!" Skeeter called after him as he turned to leave. But her cries went unanswered. Harry had already walked out the door and closed it behind him.

Chapter 12 – Approaching Darkness

"You did **WHAT?**!" Harry cried.

"You heard me." Solieyu said, staring into the fire.

"Yeah, I bloody *heard* you. Just that I'm having a hard time *believing* what I heard!" Harry said, storming around to the front of the couch to glare at the vampire. "Why the hell would you do something like that?!"

"Because it keeps her reigned in."

"Explain."

Solieyu sighed. "Isn't it obvious, Harry? At least within Hogwarts, there's only so much she can do. If she's expelled, what keeps her from sneaking back in and doing whatever she bloody pleases?"

"She seemed to be doing a fair job of doing what she pleased yesterday." Tonks stated.

"Yes. And she had all the time in the world to out me as a vampire to everyone gathered there. Now if either of you will tell me *why* she didn't do this, I'll concede the point and go back to Dumbledore." Solieyu said. "But unless you can, my point stands - she won't get into serious trouble for this!"

"You're out of your mind, Leon." Harry said, glaring openly.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps I'd rather know where my enemies are." Solieyu said, getting to his feet to glare back at Harry. "Wouldn't *you* feel more at ease if Moody was openly opposing you?!"

"Not the point of this!" Harry growled, grabbing Solieyu by the front of his robes and pulling him in closer. "You had every chance to get that girl thrown out and instead you tell Dumbledore to leave her be?!"

Narrowing his eyes, Solieyu grabbed at the front of Harry's robes and spat, "She can only do so much inside school grounds! What part of that isn't sinking in?!"

"The part that tells me a three-headed dog, a basilisk, and Voldemort himself in two seperate forms on two seperate occasions have **ALSO BEEN INSIDE SCHOOL GROUNDS!**" Harry yelled.

"And you handled those rather well." Solieyu said.

"*Someone* had to." Harry hissed.

"Calling me out on not being around for the 'fun stuff,' are you?"

"Well, I didn't want to be so blatant." Harry said, smirking.

Solieyu swatted Harry's hands and shoved him away, turning and walking towards the door. "This is my problem, I'll see to it however I bloody choose."

"Then don't expect me to step in and save your ass next time." Harry said. "She can out you in front of the collected school for all I care! It'd serve you right for being so damned stupid!"

Tonks winced as two doors slammed. Solieyu going out the front and Harry going into the bedroom. She blew out a long sigh as she trudged over to the couch and flopped down on it. The day had been an absolute mess. Apparently, Luna had taken Solieyu up to the Nest instead of the Pit for a bit of fresh air. Harry and Tonks didn't see him for the rest of the day. But the following day, when he had returned, it was to tell Harry and Tonks that he had gone to speak with Dumbledore regarding his fight.

He had asked the headmaster not to jump on Demetra too hard. Whatever had transpired in the Dumbledore's office had apparently been enough for the old man to grant Solieyu his way in the matter. And Harry hadn't been happy with it in the least. In his mind, having Demetra kicked out would have been one less thing to have to worry about and deal with.

Rubbing at her temples briefly, Tonks glanced over at the fireplace, where Boris was stretched out. "You ever get the feeling that we're the only sane ones around here?"

"*A scary thought.*" Replied the snake lazily.

And, despite the fact that Tonks couldn't speak Parseltongue, she thought she understood him perfectly.

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About an hour later, Harry had left the bedroom, not looking to be in a better mood. He had immediately gone into the Training Room. Tonks couldn't hear anything that might have happened inside, as Harry had made sure to soundproof the walls. When he emerged half an hour afterwards, he looked a bit less angry.

"I'm going down to the lake." He said. "Want to come with?"

"Was actually thinking of hunting Luna down to see what she thinks of this mess." Tonks said, getting up.

"Fair enough." Harry said, turning towards the door. "Though I have a sneaking suspicion she'll side with him."

"Probably." Tonks agreed. "Enjoy your sit."

"Meh." Was all Harry said in reply before leaving.

Rolling her eyes, Tonks let out an exasperated 'boys!' before following Harry out of the Pit.

Harry thankfully had an uneventful trip down to the lake. He wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone at the moment, despite having exhausted himself in the Training Room. He just wanted to unwind and forget his problems, if only for a short time. It was a chilly day out and the wind was blowing rather fiercely. As such, the giant squid didn't seem to want to make an appearance.

He sat down and immediately flopped backwards to stare up at the sky. Honestly, what was Solieyu playing at? He was clearly much

safer with that Iscariot witch out of the school, couldn't he see that? That Dumbledore seemed to side with the vampire infuriated Harry even more. What *possible* reasoning could Solieyu have come up with? What was he waiting for? A full-on assault with blessed holy weapons? Maybe getting another splash with holy water would snap him out of his madness.

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had a headache that could drop a giant. And the more he thought about what had happened, the more it worsened. Going to talk to Dumbledore himself would be futile, as the headmaster would likely just repeat everything that Solieyu had said.

Truth be told, it wasn't the first time Harry had found himself annoyed at the vampire this year. His vampiric charm seemed to be having issues. And while Harry appreciated someone else taking the burden of his own fangirls away, that they were still *around* was the problem here. Harry had tried talking to Solieyu about reeling his power in, but the vampire denied anything was wrong and that he had perfect control over all the powers he had gained so far.

"Wish they'd chase him clean through the school sometime." Harry muttered, closing his eyes. "*Then* let him say he's in full control. Idiotic bloodsucker."

Harry wasn't exactly sure how much time passed by after that. He kept on guard even while stretched out in the grass - no sense being lax about it. Why the hell couldn't he have one problem-free year at this infernal school? Why did someone always have to have it out for him?

For the first time, Harry found himself wishing Terry Boot were around. Not because he missed his insane ex-dormmate, he just wanted an easy target to get into a fight with. A real fight would relieve so much more tension than slashing apart practice dummies. Not that Terry wasn't a practice dummy as well, it's just he moved around a bit more.

'Maybe I should go hang out with the twins for awhile.' He thought. *'At least then I'd be guaranteed a few laughs. I could use a few right now. Nothing's going right this year. And for some reason, I can't imagine it getting better.'*

So lost in his thoughts was he that he didn't hear the soft footsteps of someone approaching. Nor did he sense someone looming over him until his sunlight was blocked out. Opening his eyes, he found a pair of deep blue eyes looking back at him.

"**Gah!**" He cried, jumping.

"**Ah!** ...Don't do that, you scared me!"

Harry blinked. The deep blue eyes belonged to a young girl. Harry frowned. "...Wait, aren't you from Beauxbatons...?"

The girl nodded, smiling. "I am." She said in a mildly thick French accent.

"Aren't you a little young?" He asked.

"I am almost nine." Said the girl indignantly.

"Not what I'm saying. Do witches who go to Beauxbatons start earlier or something?"

"No. But my older sister was coming and she is my only living relative. So I came too." Said the girl.

"Ahh." Harry said, sitting up. "What's your name?"

"Gabrielle Delacour. And *you* are Harry Potter." She said, sitting down next to Harry and grinning.

Harry groaned. "I really don't like being famous."

Gabrielle blinked. "Why not?"

Harry made a vague gesture. "It's bothersome. Everyone always wants to know about you. *Everything* about you. That and people seem to stare at my scar."

"But is it not like a badge of honor?" Asked Gabrielle. "You were able to get rid of HIM!"

"Not permanently." Harry muttered.

Another confused blink. "What do you mean?"

Harry glanced aside at the girl. "I can give you the short version or the long version."

"Long version!"

Harry nodded, then launched into a still rather abridged account of his dealings at Hogwarts. Gabrielle was a very good listener and seemed to get very into Harry's tale, gasping and squeaking in places as he described the types of things he had fought against in the past three years.

"...And now my name made it into that dumb Goblet somehow. It's like I'm cursed or something." He finished.

"You should not think like that." Stated the girl. "You are very brave as well as very strong for overcoming such odds!"

"It was luck on all accounts." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. "Despite all the bad luck that gets me into these messes, good luck seems to get me out of them each time. I just hope it lasts."

Gabrielle *grinned* at him then, which made him scoot away slightly. He had seen that type of grin on Tonks' face when she was slightly younger. The girl obviously had something she wanted to tell Harry. And, judging by the look she was giving him, it was going to be important.

She glanced around in a highly melodramatic way before leaning in and whispering, "I can help you out with the First Task."

Harry blinked. "The First Task? Of the Tournament? ...How?"

"I heard my older sister talking to herself." Gabrielle said, still holding that odd grin. "She was talking about dragons."

"Dragons?!" Harry hissed, goggling at the younger girl. "Wait, how does *she* know? We shouldn't be getting any information for a *while* now."

"I'm not sure. But she seemed very worried." Gabrielle said.

Harry groaned. "Great. If that's true, more fun for me."

"I think it's true." Gabrielle said. "Not many people outside of the other girls from Beauxbatons talk to Fleur. All the boys seem to drool over her."

"That sounds familiar." Harry said, scowling. "...Anyway, so who could have told her, then?"

"Probably Madam Maxime." Said the girl. "The headmistress *would* know, of course. But she isn't supposed to say anything."

"You overhear a lot of things, don't you?" Asked Harry.

He received a smile in return.

"Well," He said, sighing. "Thanks for the warning. I'm hoping it'll be something less dramatic... but at least I can try to prepare if it isn't."

Gabrielle nodded. "I should go..."

"Hey, before you do - why'd you come talk to me?" Harry asked.

Gabrielle's cheeks flushed and she turned away. "You're Harry Potter." She said, as if that explained everything. And without another word, she started running back up towards the castle.

"Dragons." Harry said, watching her go. "Lovely. Maybe I can feed Leon to it and it'll choke to death on his ego. Two birds with one stone."

And, groaning, he got to his feet. He could ponder what the possibly First Task was later. He still had plenty of time, after all. But he had something more important to tend to. Something he had, ashamed as he was to admit it, forgotten about until just now.

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Hermione had positively cooed when he told her his plan.

"Oh, she'll love it!" Hermione gushed. "But you're going to make your fan club very upset..."

"Willing to take that risk." Harry said, grinning crookedly. "So... so you think it'll work, then?"

Hermione waited until Madam Pince passed by - they were in the library, of course - before replying, "I do. I think it will be very difficult to do, but I think it will work if we can."

"I don't like 'if's very much." Harry said.

"No, I can't imagine you would. But... Harry, aren't you worried she'll pick up on it?" Hermione asked, biting at her lower lip.

"I don't think she will. She knows I can't dance. I've already asked the twins about music. I know there's going to be some live band playing. And I want to make sure what I ask Tonks to teach me can synch up." Harry said.

"That would be risky." Hermione said.

"Yeah. But again, I'm willing to take it. But if she does ask, I'll just tell her that I want to spend the night relaxing and that, as long as I *have* to dance, I may as well show off a bit."

Hermione let out a sigh. "It sounds so... romantic. Are you sure *you* thought of it?"

"Hey!"

Hermione grinned. "I'm just teasing, Harry."

Harry pouted. "Yes, I *did* think of it, thank you very much. Problem is, all of my plans are usually ridiculously intricate. I need to learn to keep it simple."

"Yes, but if you manage to pull it off, think of how it'll look." Hermione said. "She'll love you forever for it."

Feeling his cheeks heat up, Harry glanced off. "Yeah, well... I hope so. I'm just tired of dancing around the issue, you know? Anyway, enough about me - have *you* got a date for the Ball yet?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I think Ron tried to ask me, but given how he's treated me in the past, I wasn't about to take him up on the offer."

"A wise decision. Has he at least cooled off lately?" Harry asked.

"Oh, he's loads better. But he's still an idiot." Hermione said, smiling.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I dunno. Ginny keeps pining about wanting to go, though. She's complained about how it isn't fair everyone below our year can't go." Hermione said.

"So invite her to tag along with you." Harry said, shrugging. "Not like it's a date or anything."

"People would talk." Hermione said, making a face.

"People tend to do that anyway." Harry said. "This way I'd have one more person I could trust there. Which sounds really selfish out loud."

Hermione laughed quietly. "Oh, stop it. You could do with a bit more happiness in your life."

"Yeah, well... not doing so good at the moment." Harry muttered.

"So I've heard. Maybe I will see if Ginny wants to come along. If anyone tries to start any rumors, we can always remind them that she *does* have four older brothers at school."

"No one would dare call down the thunder that is Fred and George." Harry said, nodding. "It'll be fun - you could do with a bit of enjoyment in your own life, you know."

"I'll have you know I love reading books." Hermione sniffed.

"Oh, I agree wholeheartedly. Doesn't mean I don't like to get away from them on occasion." Harry said.

"Well... okay, true. I guess it wouldn't hurt."

"Great! I've already talked to the twins about this - passed them on my way in - and they're in. If I've got you and Ginny watching my back, that'll help loads. I'll have six guards... if I get around to speaking to that idiot again."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You *could* trust your friend's judgement, you know."

"I could. But... oh, damn it all, I can't explain this. I need to call another meeting and he needs to be there because this is going to drive me nutty if I don't." Harry said.

"**SHHHHHHH!**" Came Madam Pince's voice from *just* over Harry's right shoulder, causing him to let out a highly undignified squawk and almost fall out of his chair.

Harry glared at the woman as she seemed to meld back in with the rows of bookshelves. "Bloody old gorgon." He muttered darkly.

"So what do you need to have a meeting about?" Hermione asked.

"Leon." Harry said, shaking his head. "He needs... more people to know. He needs... I dunno. More people to be able to watch his back if it comes to it."

Hermione tilted her head. "About his little problem?"

"Yeah."

"Who are you wanting to tell?"

"The twins and Parkinson. And Ginny, if she's going to help on guard duty."

"Pansy Parkinson?" Hermione asked.

"I trust her." Harry said. "Odd as she is."

"...If you're sure. When do you want to have this meeting?"

"Today. ...Okay, let me think. If you could find Ginny, then collect the twins, they'll be able to bring you in."

"Bring us in?"

"They can explain." Harry said. "Tonks should know where Luna is... and she can drag Leon down. I'll have to hunt down Parkinson myself, I guess."

"You're very confusing, Harry."

"My whole life is confusing." He replied, standing up.

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It had taken the better part of the day, but everyone was finally assembled down in the Snake Pit that evening. Of course, Hermione and Ginny were impressed with the place, with Hermione commending Harry on his Transfiguration and general cleanup of the rooms.

Tonks had returned, saying that Luna was on the hunt for Solieyu and that they could arrive at any time. Harry nodded then turned to the assembled group. "Okay... some of you already know what's going on here. Some of you don't. Anyone care to hazard a guess?"

"Well it's obviously about Leon." Fred said.

"And that it must be important for such a gathering." George added.

"Probably regarding his fight."

"And why he had to be taken away."

"Which means something's wrong with him."

Harry smirked. "You're on the right track."

"Are you sure you should be doing this before he gets here?" Hermione asked. "He might not like you doing this."

"Yeah, well, if he's going to be an idiot and not do anything about that wench from Iscariot, then I'm going to get more people to watch his back." Harry said, scowling as he mentioned Demetra. He also noted that Hermione's eyes lit up.

Before anyone else could say anything, the door opened up. Luna entered, firmly attached to Solieyu's left arm. He looked mildly annoyed, at best. But, upon seeing the assembled group, a realization seemed to wash over him.

"That's what smelled wrong." He muttered. "What's going on?"

Harry closed the door behind the two and Luna tugged Solieyu towards the couch. "As I was just explaining to the others... if you're going to be stubborn about the Iscariot girl, I'm going to make sure more people are watching your back."

Solieyu froze. "...You haven't said anything yet?"

"The twins seemed to be doing good at guessing why we're all here." Harry said. "But no. I haven't said anything yet."

"Nor *WILL* you." Solieyu growled, glaring at Harry.

"Don't you take that tone with me, Leon. This is for your own damn good! What if I hadn't been there? What if she had said something? What if you lost control and showed everyone on your *own*?!"

"It's my choice to make!"

"The **HELL** it is, you damned vampire!" Harry roared.

There was silence in the Main Hall.

"He's... he's a vampire?" Ginny asked, looking from Harry to Solieyu, who looked livid.

"He is." Hermione said, her voice quiet. "Ron and I found out towards the end of last year..."

"It would explain why he doesn't eat." George said.

"One mystery solved!"

"Figures you'd be hanging out with one, Potter." Pansy mumbled.

Harry smirked victoriously. "Now that wasn't so bad, *was* it? I don't see any of them longing to douse your fat head in holy water!"

"As soon as Luna lets go of my arm, I'm going to beat you bloody." Solieyu growled.

"You can try." Harry said, eyes narrowing. "But you'll lose. You told Tonks and I of your own free will. You openly stated that you were a vampire in front of Ron, Hermione, Professor Lupin, *and* Sirius. And you're worried about more people knowing *now*?! They're our friends too, you daft sod! When are you going to learn that you aren't *alone* anymore?!"

"How do you know they won't tell anyone?!" Solieyu growled, eyes distinctly landing on Pansy.

Pansy glared. "I take offense to that. My father knows quite a few vampires. They've never been anything but polite to my family."

"Now, the reason I'm telling you lot this..." Harry began, glancing back towards the group. "Is because Demetra is from Iscariot. In short, she's a vampire hunter sent from the Vatican. We weren't sure, but... that little fight seemed to prove it. There's no way she would know about Leon otherwise. At least not that I can work out. It's too convenient to ignore. You Gryffindor lot, I'd like you to keep an eye on her. Have any of you noticed anything odd?"

"She likes to keep to herself." Ginny said. "She's not anti-social, she just seems preoccupied by something."

"Probably how to taunt Leon into losing control of his *powers*." Harry said, shooting the evil eye towards Solieyu.

"So... does this mean he drinks blood?" Ginny asked.

"No. He takes a special potion. It's an imitation, basically. Cures any cravings he's having and returns him to normal." Harry said. "Madam

Pomfrey gives it to him. She and Dumbledore both know. I'm pretty sure most of the staff does, too."

"The more people who know..." Solieyu began.

"The more that can help you out if you get into another fight! Leon, in his infinite wisdom, went to Dumbledore to ask that any possible punishment for Demetra be called off. He thinks he's safer knowing that she's in the castle and going to classes than roaming the grounds like some kind of horrible ninja, waiting to ambush him." Harry said.

"Makes sense to me." George said.

"Keep your enemies close, eh?" Fred added.

Harry walked over towards Solieyu. "Stop being so bloody paranoid and start accepting the fact that we're your friends. That girl didn't expose you during your fight and she had every chance in the world to. But if she does, we'll make sure no one tries any funny stuff."

And with that, Harry pulled back his right hand, balled it up, and sent it flying into Solieyu's cheek.

Multiple cries of Harry's name came from the girls in the room, while the twins put their hands on their wands, just in case they were going to need to break up a fight.

Solieyu, hand on his cheek, glared up at Harry, who was rubbing his knuckles. "You're a right asshole, Potter."

"Yes, well, your lovely personality must be having that effect on me." Harry replied. He then extended his still-sore hand out.

After a moment, Solieyu took it, getting up. The two stared at one another for a moment before smiling.

"Are you two done being idiots?" Tonks asked, sounding thoroughly bored.

"For the time being." Harry said, slipping his hands into his pockets.
"Anyone up for some dinner?"

"Dinner?" Hermione and Ginny asked.

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Harry sighed as he stretched out in bed that night. It had been a very, very trying day. Before everyone had left, Harry had pulled Solieyu and Luna aside to whisper his secret plan to them. Both seemed surprised, but agreed to help him out. The only one who didn't know was Pansy, and that was the way Harry was planning on keeping it. He had asked Hermione to explain things to Ginny, which he assumed she would once they were out of earshot of anyone.

Tonks crawled into bed next to him and, as usual, snuggled up against him once she had settled herself. "I'm glad that mess worked itself out."

"Yeah." Harry said. "Now the only thing I have to worry about in the immediate future are the dragons."

"Dragons?" Tonks asked. "Why do you need to worry about those for?"

"Remember that little girl we saw with the Beauxbatons girls? She found me out by the lake and said that her older sister was pacing around, muttering about them. She thinks their headmistress leaked the info early. Dragons are going to be involved in the First Task somehow." Harry explained.

Tonks groaned, burying her face against Harry's shoulder. "*Dragons...* things just don't get any better, do they? You fix one problem and another decides to come along."

"That's generally how things work for me, yes. So Tonks... care to teach me how to dance?"

"Oh, you wanna take me up on my offer after all?" Tonks asked, beaming.

"Yeah, I think it could do some good. No sense in making an ass of myself, right? I asked the twins to hunt us down some music. Hopefully they'll get back to me soon." Harry said, grinning.

"Excellent! You won't regret it - I'm an excellent teacher." Tonks stated.

"Are you? That's news to me-- Ow!"

Tonks stuck out her tongue. "I taught you how to use your Metamorphmagus powers, did I not?"

"You did." Harry said, mentally adding, 'And you're going to be impressed with how I'll be using them.'

"Dragons." Tonks said, lowering her head onto Harry's shoulder again. "I'm glad there's still a fair bit of time left."

"Same. ...I'm thinking of telling Diggory." Harry said.

"What? Why?"

"Because I'm betting Krum already knows, too. Karkaroff doesn't exactly seem the type to play fair." Harry said. "I don't think Professor Sprout would spill the beans, though. It isn't right that he's the only one who doesn't know. Besides... he's the rightful Hogwarts Champion."

"You're a real sweetheart sometimes." Tonks said.

"Sometimes? I'm always a nice guy." Harry responded, jutting his chin out.

Snickering, Tonks bopped him lightly. "Yes, you proved that today in a stupid roundabout way."

"It was for his own good." Harry said. "He's far too uptight."

"You're one to talk. Your muscles are all knotted." Tonks mumbled.

Harry sighed, leaning his head over against Tonks'. "I know. I should be okay... I doubt they're going to make us fight the dragons. I can't

imagine they'd be free-roaming, either. So they'll probably be locked down in one spot. Which makes me wonder what the hell we're going to be doing. I can deal with a dragon who can't chase after me."

"You don't know any of that for sure. Just guesswork. You shouldn't assume things like that. For all you know, you'll have to race the dragon on your broom." Tonks said.

"What, like doing laps around the school? That'd be stupid." Harry said.

There was a pause.

"Anyway, I'm bushed." Harry said. "Let's get some rest. I can start reading up on dragons tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan. Night, Harry."

"Sweet dreams, Nymmy."

Chapter 13 – Countdown

Much to Harry's relief, things quieted down after the gathering in the Pit. Solieyu returned to his normal, calm state. The Gryffindors were also reporting in that Demetra was acting strangely normal, as well. Whatever had been on her mind prior to her attack on the vampire, it wasn't clouding her anymore. She seemed to be more outgoing and even appeared to be gaining a few friends around the school.

Still, not all was going well, per se. Mad-Eye Moody's classes continued to put Harry on-edge. Especially since the man had announced that he'd be holding an in-class dueling session to check everyone's strengths and weaknesses. It was to be set not long after the First Task, which was barely a week away now.

Harry had bunkered down with a handful of books from the library regarding dragons, but none gave him any useful information. Especially as he still didn't know what he had to do. He couldn't plan if he had no idea what he was going to need, so he settled on a wide range of things to put into a plan. One of them would surely get him through the ordeal intact.

He hadn't yet gone to seek out Cedric Diggory to relate the information. Mostly because it was almost impossible to catch the Hufflepuff alone. He was always surrounded by friends and fans, both coming to and leaving from classes. People who still glared at Harry as if he had meant to become a part of the Tournament. People who he had already had to deflect a few low-level spells against.

It was partly due to them that Harry had started to practice shield spells again. He was able to use a fairly wide range, but it had been a fair while since he had to use them and thus he was getting rusty. It never hurt to have something down pat, and if a good shield could keep dragonfire off of him, all the better.

Harry would often encounter Hermione sitting in one of the front corners of the Pit, sitting and reading or working in the chairs there. She was a very nice guest in that she was quiet and tended to slip in and out undetected. As he had worried about, Fred and George seemed to pop up in the Training Room every so often. In the end,

Harry had done as was suggested to him and gave them their own little corner of the room to experiment on things on, but only under the condition that no tests of anything they cooked up be used on Pit residents.

Ginny and Pansy had generally kept away from the Pit, however. Pansy because it was simply too risky for her to randomly vanish for long periods of time. Malfoy had already been accusing her of seeing somebody else. Which amused Pansy, as she wasn't going out with him.

Malfoy. He was another oddity to Harry. The blonde had more or less kept to himself, his ties to Crabbe and Goyle seemingly severed. The one time Harry had brought this up to Pansy, she had shrugged and told him that Malfoy was just in a *mood* lately. This led to Harry nearly doubling over with laughter at the thought of the Slytherin sitting in a corner and reciting gloomy, gloomy poetry and dying his hair black.

The twins had come through for Harry, securing the playlist for the Yule Ball. Harry tried asking how they managed it, but neither would spill the beans, saying that they needed to have a *few* secrets left. It was a band called the Weird Sisters, who Harry had only vaguely heard of. From what the twins had told him, they played a wide range of music, sticking mostly to fast, upbeat songs and ridiculously long ballads.

The Ball was to start on a high note with an instrumental piece that immediately led into a quick number. That, in turn, slowed down into a love song. The first love song chained into a second. That one amped things back up to a quicker tune, another instrumental, and another slow song. Harry thought it was a rather short list, but the twins insisted that even the faster rock songs were pretty long. Harry trusted them on it and put the list into his trunk after memorizing the order.

Harry was rather unsure of how wizarding music worked. He knew there were radios, but apparently record stores just didn't exist. Tonks tried to sit him down and explain the logic of it all, but it just wound up confusing him even further. In the end, Harry decided to just try winging it.

He had asked Tonks to go through the steps of each song, though she obviously didn't realize what he was upto. Harry was slightly annoyed by the lack of song length notes, but it didn't matter in the end. Most dances were apparently just the same handful of steps repeated ad nauseum. Harry supposed it was all for the better, as the less he had to keep track of, the better.

It had been rather embarrassing at first - dancing was very... hands-on, Harry had learned. Still, the slow dances were rather nice. Often, the two would end up not moving for some length of time, both just staring into the other's eyes. Eventually, they would snap out of it and Harry would mentally chastise himself for being so easily distracted. He wouldn't be able to do that at the ball! He'd make a fool of himself! As it was, he was going to be risking a lot in front of everyone who attended.

Six guards was better than none, though. And he was counting on them to help keep any uproar he caused away from himself and Tonks. He wasn't sure what might happen, but he was going to play it as safely as he possibly could.

Eventually, Harry realized that he needed to hunt Cedric Diggory down one way or another. He decided to wait outside Professor Flitwick's classroom. Annoyingly enough, Diggory exited with a small crowd already. But before they could get too far away, Harry whistled. "Oi, Diggory!"

Cedric (and his assembly) turned around. "What do you want, Potter?" He asked.

"We need to talk. It's about the First Task." Harry said, walking over. "And I'd rather it be away from your entourage."

"You're just planning to hex him!" Said one of the girls encircling the Hufflepuff.

"Of course I'm not. If I was, I would have hexed him as you lot walked out." Harry said.

The two Champions had a bit of a staredown. Harry was trying to will Cedric into abandoning his cavalcade and Cedric was trying to determine if Harry was trustworthy enough to have a solo chat.

"...Fine. But we pick an empty classroom and my friends stay outside." Cedric finally said.

"Fine. You pick the room." Harry said, slipping his hands into his pants pockets.

The group made their way up a few halls before finding a good-enough place. Cedric gave his friends a short talking to, saying that if they heard anything suspicious, they could come in and check. Harry was fine with this, but felt it unnecessary. If he hexed Cedric in the room, he'd have to barrel through the crowd to escape anyway.

When the two were finally alone, Cedric crossed the room and asked, "Okay, so what's this about the First Task?"

"I know what it is." Harry said.

"What? Don't be stupid, none of us do yet. They won't be telling us until right before it happens."

Shaking his head, Harry replied, "No. Look, you know that little girl who came with the Beauxbatons girls? She caught me down by the lake awhile ago and told me she heard her older sister - Fleur Delacour, the Champion for Beauxbatons - muttering about dragons. She thought the headmistress of their school 'accidentally' let it slip. And if she knows, chances are Krum does too."

"Dragons." Cedric repeated. "...Are you sure?"

"Not in the least." Harry said, grinning crookedly. "But it doesn't hurt to be safe, right? Dunno what you plan to do, but I've been checking up on shield spells and summoning charms."

"Hm. If what you say is true..." Cedric began, looking deep in thought for a moment. "...Why did you decide to tell me this?"

"Because you were the only one who didn't know. And you're the rightful Champion of Hogwarts, anyway." Harry said.

"...You really didn't enter your name, did you?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell people." Harry said. "You've been here, you know the kind of crap that happens to me every year. Par for the course, I suppose."

Cedric nodded slowly, then turned around. "Whether it turns out to be true or not, thank you for letting me know. Very sportsmanlike."

"Just don't expect the same sort of generosity next time we're on the Quidditch Pitch." Harry said, smirking.

"Wouldn't expect it." Said Diggory, opening the door to the room. And, after assuring his group that Harry really did only want to talk, they took off back down the hall.

"Well." Harry said into the silence of the room. "That's one thing taken care of."

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The day before the First Task was set to be held, Harry found himself alone in the Pit. Well, alone save for the taipan who was curled up around his neck.

"You're getting lazy." Harry commented.

"I've been living in a relatively cold castle and the weather grows colder. The warmth has been wonderful." Replied the snake.

"Be that as it may, I think I may start toting you around with me again. Aside from the fact that it seems to spook the Slytherins, it'd be nice to talk to you more often. We've kind of stopped sitting around and chatting since school started."

"You've been quite busy."

Harry sighed. "Yeah. That's the problem. You wouldn't happen to know anything in regards to dragons, would you?"

"Not much. Just that their hides are almost impossible to pierce through unless you hit them just so."

"Think the Eximo would work?"

The snake grew quiet. *"...I'd prefer you not use that unless it is a life or death situation, Harry. I cannot forbid you from using it, but I will state that I think it unwise to use in front of an assembly. The spell is what would probably be classified as Dark Arts."*

"I figured as much." Harry replied, sighing. "...I don't suppose you'll tell me of the stronger spell your master made, then?"

"Absolutely not!" Hissed the snake fiercely. *"I will never tell you of that spell. I still remember what he used it for... what effects it had. And I'll not be teaching the likes of you something that Dark."*

"I've killed, Boris. Numerous times, in fact." Harry said.

"You have killed to defend, Harry. You've only purposely killed two things - monsters, at that. The basilisk and that minotaur."

"Voldemort and any of his vessels count too." Harry stated.

"Perhaps. But one was but a memory and the other was possessed by the dark wizard's spirit himself. You did what you had to. The POINT, Harry, is that you have not killed for sport. And while my master's crowning achievement, as he oftentimes called it, did not kill... it may as well have."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "And what does that mean?"

"You'd be surprised what you can live through." Hissed the snake. *"And we shall leave it at that. I do not like this line of conversation."*

"Fair enough." Harry said, knowing he'd not get any further information out of his slithering friend today. "Doesn't change the fact that I need to work out how to stop a dragon. Or something like that. I

wish they'd tell us what we'll be doing *before* we get there. Makes it hard to prepare."

"*And thus you'll exhibit how well you think on your feet.*" Replied Boris. "*While I don't want you to use the Eximo in battle unless it's a life or death situation... I wouldn't disapprove of you using that cutting spell you seem so intrigued by.*"

"The Sectumsempra? Yeah, I've almost got casting it down. It's a very finnickily spell, you know. I have to cleave the air in a straight line. Doesn't matter what direction, but it *must* be straight. Dunno how well I'll be in accuracy when I've got a dragon breathing down my back." Harry explained.

"And you've already discussed using your broomstick?"

"Yeah. Tonks and Leon both kept telling me it was a good idea. Been trying to summon it every so often, just to test it. Thankfully, using that spell isn't very difficult once you get it down. So basically, I'm going to summon my Firebolt as soon as I can and then dodge the bloody thing until I work out whatever it is I'll be doing against it."

"Sounds like a plan. If you can hold on until the broom arrives, that is."

"You're very pessimistic today." Harry commented. "What's got you in a mood?"

"Thinking about *that* spell." Hissed the snake. "You've only got yourself to blame if I seem troubled."

"Sorry. Was it really that bad?"

"It was." Said Boris.

"Lovely. Look, I'm going to go train some more. I still need to work out a good spell to protect me against fire and I've not got a lot of time left." Harry said. "Want to stay here?"

"I would rather sit in front of a fire. Not be engulfed by it."

"Suit yourself. Down you go, then."

Harry held his arm up to his neck and the little taipan slithered out onto it. Getting to his feet, Harry stepped over to the fireplace and set Boris down on his favorite spot.

"Sleep well." Harry said, smirking as Boris coiled up.

"Enjoy your roasting."

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Harry sighed. "What the hell are they waiting for?"

Cedric, who was sitting with his legs crossed near the tent's entrance, shrugged. "Probably getting our little test prepared."

"Dragons." Harry said, smirking as he held up his little statue.

"Dragons." Cedric echoed, returning the smirk.

"Oughta be interesting."

One by the one, the Champions were carted out of the tent. Krum was first, Fleur followed him, and Cedric was tapped third. Before he left, he gave Harry a thumbs-up and a nod. Harry smiled in reply. Looks like the blind gamble had paid off after all. Still... he hadn't been enjoying the noises coming from the arena. The dragons did *not* sound happy to be chained up. He could tell they were immobile - he knew what chains sounded like. He *was*, however, trying to imagine how massive they had to be to subdue dragons.

Cedric's turn seemed to last hours. But, finally, a rousing applause filled the air and he new he was up next. Just his luck, he had drawn what was possibly the meanest species of the four brought in.

"Potter. You're up." Said the man who poked his head into the tent a few minutes later.

Harry groaned, setting his statue down and leaving the safety of the tent. He glanced around quickly, but didn't see any signs of the other

Champions. Just as well. He didn't want to see any aftermath before his own fight took place. He had long since steeled his nerves. Even after seeing how big a real dragon actually was, he remained in some state of calm, though his mind was racing a mile a minute.

He had to collect a golden egg from a clutch situated almost under the thing. Yeah, *that* was going to be fun. What lunatic thought the Tournament games up, anyway?

He was indeed right when he heard the sound of chains, but the thing only seemed to have its front-right leg latched down from them. Must have been some majorly strong spells binding *that* thing, Harry figured. But it made things trickier, certainly. That damned thing could spin around with only one leg pinned down. Harry wasn't in any hurry to get slammed with a tail like that thing had.

"Final match!" Called a man from the stands. "Begin!"

Harry had his wand out in an instant, aiming back to the castle and crying, "**ACCIO FIREBOLT!**"

Unfortunately, the Horntail was faster than Harry figured it to be. While the Ravenclaw had momentarily spun to summon his broom, the dragon had spun around as well. The side of its tail smashed into Harry's midsection, sending him flying across the rocky battlefield. There was a shocked cry from one part of the stands while another erupted into cheers.

Harry couldn't breathe. Every time he drew in a breath, a series of sharp pains exploded in his chest.

'*Shit...*' He thought, wincing as he rolled behind a particularly tall rock jutting out. '*My ribs...*'

The sound of shattering glass echoed faintly in the distance. It was the only bright side to this fight so far. If the dragon hadn't broken his ribs, he had cracked most of them. The Firebolt finally on its way would at least allow him to rise above the bloody creature's range of attack.

All he had to do was wait.

Chapter 14 – Dragon's Blood

The Firebolt was coming, but it wouldn't get there fast enough for Harry's liking.

Still stuck behind a rock, he was having to flatten out to avoid the occasional burst of fire that the Horntail was spewing forth. He wasn't having a good time. He could only breathe in short spurts. Anything deep would cause his injured ribs to scream out. All he wanted was to take to the air and catch his breath.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually the Firebolt crested over a section of the stands and over to where Harry was hiding. He grabbed it and spun it vertically so that another fire blast wouldn't torch it.

'If I get this thing destroyed, Sirius'll kill me!' He thought, quickly mounting the broom and kicking off into the air. He had to jerk to dodge yet another fireball, something his chest really didn't appreciate. He bit back a cry of pain and swerved up higher into the air, out of the fire's range.

"Dammit." He swore, gingerly rubbing his chest. "This isn't going very well. Gonna have to rethink my plans."

He sat there in the air a few minutes, recovering and thinking, before the idea occurred to him. "I doubt it could be that easy, but... **ACCIO GOLDEN EGG!**"

The golden egg seemed to buzz down amidst its white siblings, but didn't fly up to Harry. He had figured as much. That would've been far too simple. Still, he was a bit surprised that it was charmed to stay put. Most people wouldn't have even thought to use a simple summoning charm. Under the watchful gaze of most of the school, using Accio to float the egg into one's arms wouldn't make a very good show.

"They want to make a showing of it." He chuckled, wincing slightly.

Another couple of minutes passed. The crowd was starting to get restless, as was the Horntail. It was constantly stomping its front legs and spitting bursts of flame up into the air, which Harry would easily

dodge. He had promised Boris not to use the Invidia Eximo unless he absolutely had to. He wasn't so out of it yet that he felt he had to fall back on the explosive spell. And besides, the kickback was massive. Even on his broom, he wasn't sure he wanted to risk using it. His ribs were in a delicate way already. He didn't want to completely shatter them.

That only left one real option that Harry could see. And even then, he wasn't looking forward to it. It took a tremendous amount of magic to form the stupid thing. It didn't have a kickback like the Eximo did. Not really. But he could still feel something blast back through his body when he used it, almost like an oddly-shaped shockwave.

Nonetheless, it would be the quickest way to end the match. And he wanted to get to Madam Pomfrey to get his ribs fixed as soon as possible. Prolonging the match prolonged the damage he took.

If the crowd wanted a show, he would give them one. He hadn't wanted to enter the stupid Tournament. But since he was, he was in it to win. He would show whoever stuck his name into the Goblet. It was a mistake to put *him* in the Tournament!

Both hands on the Firebolt, Harry flipped back into a dive, coming in fast. The crowd let out a collective scream just as he jerked the handle up inches from the ground. He leaned forward, ignoring the hellish pain in his chest. Pushing the Firebolt as fast as he dared, Harry removed one hand to draw his wand again. Zig-zagging through the rocks littering the landscape, Harry made a circuit of the arena before coming up the center, weaving to avoid the dragonfire.

He wasn't going to lose here. He wasn't going to make a fool of himself this soon! He was Harry Potter! He had faced worse than a chained dragon and he wasn't going to be taken lightly!

"SECTUMSEMPRA!" He screamed as he jerked back on the broom. He shot up instantly, his spell cleaving the air itself as he rose. With a sharp jerk of his arm, the spell was loosed. A massive crescent of energy burst from nothingness. Though it formed a few feet in front of the Horntail, it crashed into the beast at an amazing speed. The size, enlarged by the giant arc it had been cast in, was enough to hit the dragon from head to belly.

The Horntail let out an agonized, squealing roar as blood gushed from the gigantic gash. A wave of gasps was sent through the crowd as the spell connected. Harry leveled his broom out, panting heavily, and shot a pointed look directly where Professor Snape was sitting. The Potions Master was staring at the dragon with a look of pure shock on his face. That alone was worth the further injury to his ribs.

Harry gently tipped the front end of the broom down and he started a slow descent back to solid ground. Just as his feet hit, the dragon collapsed to one side, blood still pouring from its wound. Knowing full well that he would regret ever pulling such a stunt, he walked forward and picked up the golden egg in his free hand. And, taking a deep breath, he held the prize over his head.

It got the desired result. Most of the people watching dissolved into cheers and applause. Harry knew the only reason he was still conscious was the sheer adrenaline flowing through him. The Sectumsempra had taken a lot out of him. Doing one of normal size was enough to make him feel slightly ill. He had never tried one that large before. He felt thoroughly sick now and wanted nothing more than to spend a few days sleeping in the hospital wing.

It was a very strange thing to be happy at seeing the hospital's matron glaring his way, but he just grinned at her as he left the battlefield. She was no doubt irritated to no end at what the headmaster felt was 'safe' for the students to endure. And he couldn't agree more.

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"I feel like crap."

"Language, Potter."

"Be glad I didn't say it before I toned it down."

"Indeed."

"How long am I gonna be here?"

"At least two days. I'd prefer keeping you here three just to ensure that your ribs don't heal incorrectly. Rarely a problem, but if there's one thing I've learned over the last three years it's that *you* seem to run into things none of my other patients ever have!"

Harry smirked as Madam Pomfrey, muttering under her breath, walked back to her office. One of the few times in his life that he was happy to be in the hospital wing. He had survived the First Task, though he had indeed broken four of his ribs. The stress of the Sectumsempra had cracked another two. Madam Pomfrey had fixed up everything as best she could. All that was left was to let them mend themselves. His own magic would speed that up, but he was going to be sore and sensitive for weeks.

"Hope this doesn't interfere with my plan." He muttered quietly.

His dancing practice with Tonks had continued to go along smoothly. He figured one or two more sessions and they'd be ready to make a scene at the Yule Ball. Though he also knew Tonks was getting a little questioning in regards to performing things in the same order every time. Whenever she would ask, he would state that it was a surprise and that she would find out soon enough. She had figured it had to do with the Ball, but that was about it.

He shut his eyes and relaxed. Or, at least, relaxed as much as his constantly aching chest would allow. He felt like hell. And he couldn't imagine things were going to get any better for awhile. Still... it was over. And he imagined what he had done would be talked about for awhile. He didn't expect anyone to try fighting *him* one on one anytime soon.

He hadn't done that badly. He came in second place. Fleur had beaten his time and managed to *not* injure her dragon. Harry's brute strength approach wasn't saying much for his House, but the sheer fact that he managed to topple a dragon was impressive in and of itself.

Cedric had managed to tie with Krum in third place. He had tried asking about their wounds, but Madam Pomfrey had been tight-lipped about it, saying something about confidentiality.

He was soon to find out one of the other Champion's injuries, however. The door to the hospital creaked open. Harry, whose bed wasn't surrounded by a privacy curtain, glanced over.

"Cedric. You look like crap."

"You're one to talk." Said Cedric, limping his way across the room.

"What'd yours do?" Harry asked.

"Swiped at me. Right as I was trying to leap away from its fire." Cedric said, sitting down on a bed opposite Harry's. "Crushed my leg between a rock and its claw. It's not fun hearing your bones snap."

"I wouldn't know. I think I blacked out briefly when the Horntail's tail slammed into my chest. Just glad I had enough strength left to knock it down." Harry said.

"Knock it down nothing. From what I saw, you damn near killed it!" Cedric said. "What was that spell?"

"Something I can thank our dear Potions teacher for." Harry replied, smiling cryptically.

"Snape? ...Okay, you're joking, right?" Cedric asked, looking at Harry with eyebrows raised.

"Not in the least." Harry said, grinning. "Feel free to ask *him* what spell I used. See what kind of reaction you get."

"No thanks. I'm not willing to call down the thunder from *him*. I've gotten on Snape's bad side once in the past and that was enough for a lifetime." Cedric said. "Anyway, I just came by to say thanks for the warning. Didn't keep me from being uninjured, but I'd probably be in worse shape than I am now if I hadn't done some research on dragons."

"Fair is fair. It just wasn't right for the rest of us to know while you went without any info. Just a guess, but I could say it's a fair bet that they'll be told about the next two Tasks, too." Harry said, crossing his arms behind his head.

"Probably. If I catch wind of them, I'll pass it along. You may not be in this of your own free will, but it looks like you have no plans of losing. Doesn't really matter to me either way, so long as Hogwarts winds up the victor. I'd hate to lose to a brooding buzzard or that veela."

"Veela?"

"You didn't hear? The Delacour girl's got some veela blood in her."

"That explains the attraction thing." Harry said.

"Well, she *is* pretty, so I'm sure she'd get attention even if she wasn't part veela, but it's not exactly helping matters. Dunno how it is with you Ravenclaws, but the Hufflepuff girls have started getting cranky lately, saying they haven't gotten many boys asking them to the Ball yet because they're too busy chasing after Fleur."

"I don't spend much time in Ravenclaw Tower." Harry said, smirking slightly.

"Oh? Where *do* you spend your time, then?"

"...Tell ya what. If you can come out of the Tournament on top, I'll give you access to my little hideout. Good place to get some peace and quiet." Harry said, holding out his right hand.

Cedric looked at it for a moment before he smirked as well and shook on it. "Fair enough... May as well try and have some fun with this mess, huh?"

"Yup. If they want a show, let's give it to 'em."

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Harry wasn't entirely sure when he woke up. It was well after nightfall, though. After Cedric had left, Tonks and Solieyu had stopped by for awhile. Solieyu had to keep Tonks from flinging herself at Harry, something he was grateful for. The last thing his ribs needed was being slammed into. And while he wouldn't mind such an action normally, he wanted to be fixed up as soon as possible.

"I really should've asked them to bring me some books. Not that the school's got much that's interesting. I really need to find a way into the Restricted Section. It's just sitting there, begging for me to happily scoop its books up." Harry mumbled, letting out a sigh.

Without anything to do and no potions to assist his sleep, it really was quite boring in the hospital wing. He should have asked Madam Pomfrey if she could just floo into the Pit's fireplace to treat him. He'd rather be stretched out on the couch by the fire.

Still, it wasn't entirely horrible. It was peaceful. No one else was there. Harry took that to mean that whatever happened, Fleur and Krum must not have taken serious injury from their dragons.

"You look bored." Came a quiet voice to his right.

"**GAH!** ...How do you *DO* that?" Harry asked, glaring aside at Gabrielle Delacour, who was grinning at him now.

"You seem distracted a lot." The girl said. "It is not hard."

"I'm a walking target because I think too much." Harry said, blowing out another sigh.

"I am glad you are okay. It was scary watching you fight that dragon." Said Gabrielle.

"Wasn't any less scary being out there." Harry said. "Thanks for the warning. Probably would be in much worse shape had I not been warned."

Gabrielle blushed, quickly turning away from Harry. "It was the right thing to do. I did not think it right that she and the Durmstrang boy knew and you did not."

"But you didn't tell Cedric." Harry observed.

"I figured *you* would." Came the quiet reply.

Harry smiled, raising an eyebrow. He was sure of it - he had a little fangirl. Didn't seem to be any other explanation for it. And he spoke

the truth. If Gabrielle hadn't warned him, he would have been too shocked to come up with a good plan. The thought to summon his Firebolt probably wouldn't have entered his mind at all.

Reaching out, Harry ruffled the girl's hair, causing her to squeak and scoot away.

"It's pretty late, isn't it?" Harry asked. "What are you still doing up?"

"I... wanted to come and see if you were okay." Gabrielle said, not meeting Harry's eyes. "And... and I did not want to come when other people were here."

'Yup. Definitely a fangirl. More useful than the rest of my fanclub put together, I might add.' Harry thought. Clearing his throat, he spoke aloud again, "Still... it's late. I'm just fine, thanks to you. You should head back and get some sleep before your sister finds out you're gone."

The little girl's shoulders slumped, causing Harry's brow to crease.

"My... my sister does not pay much attention to me." Gabrielle whispered. "I doubt she will notice that I have left."

"Not a very good way to treat one's little sister." Harry commented.

"I am used to it." Gabrielle said, shrugging. "It does not get easier, but I am used to it."

"You shouldn't have to be." Harry said, putting his hand on the girl's shoulder. "But trust me... I know how you feel."

"You do? But..."

"But I'm Harry Potter?"

"Yeah..."

"Sit down. Lemme tell you a bit about being Harry Potter."

Gabrielle did as told, hopping up on the bed next to Harry's as he told him about his life with the Dursleys. He gave her an abridged version

of it, leaving out anything too intense for the girl to take in, but he got his point across nonetheless. By the time he was done, she was looking thoroughly angry.

"I cannot believe they would treat you so badly!" She huffed.

"I'm used to it. It doesn't get easier, but..." Harry began.

Gabrielle's anger slowly faded and she nodded. "...If you can be strong, I can be as well!" She declared.

"That's the spirit." Harry said, grinning. "You can't let life get you down. You have to use your own two feet to move forward - no one's going to carry you. And speaking of, *your* own two feet need to move you forward to bed."

Gabrielle stuck her tongue out. "You cannot tell me what to do!"

"Maybe not. But that story took longer than I meant for it to. It's late. And I really should get some rest, as well." Harry said. "Go on to bed, Gabrielle. Get some rest. And give your sister a good telling off tomorrow for ignoring you."

Gabrielle stared at Harry for awhile before hopping down off the bed. "Do you think she would listen to me?"

"You only get one chance at life. You should spend it being good to the people around you. You never know when you might lose them." Harry said. "And I'm sure she would be sad if you suddenly vanished."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"...Thank you, Harry." Said Gabrielle, who gave the Ravenclaw a smile before she turned and bounded out of the hospital.

"It's a dangerous world out there, kid." Harry murmured after the door closed. "Your sister should be grateful to have any family at all. And she should learn to treat you better."

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Two days later, after much fussing, Madam Pomfrey finally cut Harry loose. He was thankful to escape the quiet confines of the library. He had been antsy on the second day. But that last one almost drove him crazy. He wanted to get to work on what that golden egg was supposed to do. All he knew was that it had something to do with the Second Task, which thankfully wasn't until mid-January.

He still ached terribly, but his ribs were all intact once more at the very least. He could do any further recovery in the Pit. After spending so much time in the overly bright, white hospital, he wanted to return to his dark little hole in the ground. It was still morning and he had every intention of avoiding the Great Hall. Tonks had told him that he was indeed being talked about.

Solieyu also told that Snape had been in a fouler mood than usual the last two days. And while he knew he would end up catching the majority of that once he returned to class, it would be worth it. Harry had never seen such a look on the greasy-haired man's face in his life. The power he had put into the Sectumsempra must have surprised Snape greatly. Harry wouldn't doubt that he had done better with the stupid thing than Snape had ever been. Certainly, he guessed Snape would have never been able to cast one of that *size*.

He had felt it in the last few months. Something was happening to his magical core. His power reserves had expanded quite a lot. He had been having to suppress power surges. It had been hard keeping his wild magic from breaking free, but he had somehow managed to contain it all. Things had quieted down once his wild magic was pushed down, but he was still amazed to the extent at which he could train without feeling tired.

He was strong. He knew he was strong. Stronger than he should have been. That part worried him somewhat. Someone his age certainly shouldn't be experiencing such difficulty with his core. There was no regarding curse scars in any books he had ever seen, but he knew that was the reason. Whatever had happened the night of his parents' deaths, he had been affected. His ability to talk to snakes was proof enough of it.

And given how much trouble he went through every year, he wasn't going to badmouth the power he had received. If Voldemort could be praised for anything, it was for making his very enemy stronger.

He was at least on par with the older participants of the Tournament. Judging Snape's reaction, he wouldn't be surprised if his power surpassed even that level. It had to take a lot to shock *Snape*. Harry wondered, not for the first time, if the use of his own spell wasn't the only thing to cause the reaction.

"Boris, I'm hooooome!" Called Harry as he entered the Pit.

The taipan was, as usual, curled up near the fireplace. He lifted his head, tongue flicking out a few times, before replying. "*Welcome back. Feeling better?*"

"I feel awful." Harry said, sitting on the couch and stretching out his arms and legs.

"*I was told of what took place. Very impressive. I thank you for not resorting to the Eximo.*" Boris hissed.

"I didn't have a choice. Damned dragon busted my ribs up. I wasn't about to try that, even on the Firebolt." Harry muttered. "Not that the Sectumsempra did me any *good*, mind you."

"*I'm amazed that you had enough strength for such a show.*" Boris said.

"So am I. Something's unnatural with my magical core, Boris. I'm getting stronger at a much faster rate than I should be." Harry said, tilting his head back. "I should have never had the power to do what I did. It isn't the size of the spell that's bothered me. It's the fact that I nearly killed a dragon with it. I didn't purposely put *that* much power into it. I didn't think I had that much left."

"*Interesting.*" Said the snake, curling up once more. "*What do you plan to do with this knowledge?*"

"Train." Harry said. "I'll become stronger. I'll win this stupid Tournament. I'll beat Voldemort should another of his incarnations appear."

"You'll fall into Darkness."

"I won't. It's only as Dark as you allow it to be. And I'll never allow it to consume me."

"You've already used it. You've already changed. You taste differently than you did when we met."

"Explain."

"The moment you kill, you change. The moment you begin dabbling in the Dark, you change. Something in you twists. And the more pain and death you bring to others, the more twisting takes place. Eventually, everything becomes so twisted that you can't suppress it. It takes over. And you fall into Darkness. Surely you've seen it."

Harry's eyes snapped open.

"The trees." He whispered.

"What?"

"The trees... they were all... They weren't like that before."

"You aren't making any sense."

"Every time I get knocked out, I end up in this field... there's a lake, trees... mountains in the distance. But slowly, things are changing. Every time I end up there, something's different. The last time... I heard a voice... it told me to stop destroying things."

"It has already started, then." Boris murmured. *"Unfortunate. What you saw was probably a manifestation of your magical core."*

"My core? So my core is getting messed up from this kind of thing?"

"Yes. And it's not a reversible process. You cannot purge the Darkness once you let it in, Harry. The best you can do is try and keep it from devouring you whole."

"You're not making me feel any better." Harry said.

"The truth is rarely pretty." Boris replied. "But at least now you know. You understand. And perhaps you can ensure that you fall no further than you have already."

"There has to be some way to control it." Harry said.

"If there is, I don't know of a way. This is why I don't want you to know of any more of my old master's creations. He was depraved, Harry. He messed with the dead and became warped by them."

"A necromancer?"

"Yes. I'll let you imagine what magic he managed to give birth to and leave it at that." Boris hissed. "Whatever path you go down, you must fight to keep yourself out of the Dark as much as possible. If your core is only starting to shift, it's still early enough not to worry about it. But the more you learn, the more you use... the more it will affect you. Physically, mentally, AND magically."

"There has to be a way, Boris." Hissed Harry. "There has to be a way to learn and use without being destroyed. I'll fight it. But I won't stop learning. I won't give in. I won't let it take control of me. I'm the hero."

"Do you expect to be excluded just because of that?" Asked the snake. "Is that what you honestly believe? That because you've beaten Voldemort and his incarnations, you've somehow gained exemption? Everyone can be taken over. It's only a matter of what limit you have. The stronger willed you are, the longer you'll last. But even the strongest wizard can fall."

"You can only succumb if you're weak." Harry growled, getting to his feet. "I'm not the same as your old master. I won't become like him OR Voldemort!"

The snake was silent at this.

Harry glared at the taipan before turning and walking towards the training room. "I'm going to go blow off some steam."

Boris watched Harry storm away. When the door slammed behind him, the snake let out a sigh and coiled up better. "*I can only pray you can prove me wrong. But it is best you find out now so you can learn to fight. Fight. Become stronger. And show me that not everyone will give in when it becomes too much to handle.*"

Chapter 15 – One's True Strength

"You are infected."

Harry glared at the bodiless voice.

He was glaring because he was rather stuck at the moment.

And, of course, the reason that he was stuck was because his right wrist had a chain tightly wrapped around it. The chain disappeared into the blood red lake that was mere feet in front of him.

He hadn't felt good as he had gone to bed and he had arrived in his little dreamscape world apparently as a result. The place that seemed to reflect his magical core. Harry knew where he was. He was aware of everything that was happening. And that made him more confused about it all. If it was a dream, surely the realization that it was a dream would either cause him to wake or allow him to slip into a lucid state where he could *escape* the chain.

The landscape had been dramatically altered in the time since he had last been there. The trees were coiling around themselves more and more. The snow on the far-off mountains had been tinged a faint pink. And the lake seemed like it was completely filled with blood now. He had tried shouting out to get the disembodied voice to talk to him. But when it finally did speak, its words were cryptic.

"What do you mean I'm *INFECTED*?" Harry asked.

"It is because of this that you gained such a surge of power." Continued the voice, outright ignoring Harry's question. "Surely you felt it."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?!" Harry shouted.

"Weren't you the slightest bit confused and unnerved as to how you, a wizard not even of age yet, were able to fell a mighty beast such as a dragon? How you were somehow able to penetrate its magical defenses?"

Harry stared down at the slow-moving red waves. "It... did come to mind once or twice."

"It is because you are infected." Said the voice.

"I don't understand." Harry said. "Explain."

"Surely you are already aware of this infection. You have carried it since you were but a baby. Since that night."

Harry could have choked. "...You mean the bit of power Voldemort transferred to me the night my parents were murdered? Is that this infection you're talking about?"

Harry could almost feel a nod from the very air around him before the voice continued. "It has now awakened."

"Awakened? Dammit, now you aren't making sense again..." Harry growled, jerking his right arm. This only caused the chain wrapped around it to tighten further and pull him down towards the crimson lake.

"You wanted to win. You wanted to prove yourself. You revelled in the shock on the face of the spell's creator. You felt the thrill of the crowd cheering for you as you won. You enjoyed causing the dragon pain in much the same way it caused you. You wanted it to hurt. You wanted it to fall. You wanted to see it bleed."

"No! I was injured and I wanted to bloody well end the stupid Task so I could get my ribs looked at!" Harry yelled.

"The infection responded to your emotional state. How else would you explain the surge of power you were able to generate? Badly injured, you somehow drew up the strength to topple a dragon."

"It... it was just because of how I cast the spell!"

"You are aware of how resistant to magic dragons are." Same the voice, the droning tone of its almost soothing voice lowering further. "The infection was awakened by your need for power and because

you wanted to show whoever entered your name into the Goblet of Fire that you *would* win."

"And what should I have done instead?" Harry asked, glaring at the lake for lack of anywhere better to do so. "Let the dragon kill me?!"

"Now that it has awakened, the core will slowly be consumed. It will be eaten away at an even greater pace than it would have on its own. There is no way to halt or slow this process."

"So what, I should give in? Should I just let myself be taken over by whatever stupid part of Voldemort that got left behind that night?" Harry asked. "And how the hell does this make any difference? Was he so powerful that just a part of him gave me enough power to do what I did?!"

The voice answered Harry's myriad questions with one of its own. "How else, then, did you succeed?"

"I did it on my own. Because I'd practiced the Sectumsempra and knew how to cast it well!" Harry replied. "I refuse to believe that even a fragment of Voldemort's power is enough to bring down a fully grown dragon."

"And yet here you are, your core in danger of being engulfed by that very power."

"I'll fight it." Harry hissed, grabbing at the chain with his left hand and trying to tug it up out of the bloody lake. For his troubles, however, a second chain shot out, wrapping around his left wrist. It too was then jerked down towards the surface of the lake.

"You cannot fight it."

"Fine. Say I can't. What happens if I *don't*?"

"You will fall into Darkness." Said the voice in a strangely snake-like tone.

"That sounds familiar." Harry muttered. "Okay, I'll 'fall into Darkness' then! I'm strong enough to not lose myself in it, though! Does this

mean I can tap into his power? Does it mean all my spells will increase in strength?"

"The infection is magic in its most corrupted form. You must have felt it as the day progressed. Something felt... incorrect."

"I was feeling kind of sick when I went to bed." Harry admitted.

"This is because the surge of power brought on by the infection has caused several cracks in the core to appear. There is little doubt that you *can* tap into this power now that it has awakened. But doing so will further damage the core. Abuse of this power will cause the core to become irreparably damaged. You understand what this means." Said the voice.

"I'll lose my magic and become little more than a squib..." Harry whispered. "...But how do I *keep* from tapping into the power Voldemort left behind? How do I fix my core?"

"It will heal itself over time. But know that the healing process is very slow. It will take some months before the damage from the awakening is fixed. As for how to not tap into the infection itself... that is something you will have to work out on your own."

"What?! But you have to know! You have to be able to tell me how to keep from doing more damage to myself!" Harry cried.

But the voice spoke no more. And slowly, the chains began to withdraw, dragging Harry closer and closer until he was pulled into the lake of blood completely. His eyes clamped shut as he broke past the surface. He had been able to gulp in as much air as he could given the circumstances.

He struggled, fighting the pull of the chains as he was dragged into the depths. As he went, the freezing cold temperature of the liquid began to warm. So much so that it became almost unbearably hot.

Just as his air supply was running out, the voice once more spoke to him. But this time, it seemed to come from directly next to his right ear. "Remain pure."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry snapped out of his dream at once, forcing the scream to remain lodged in his throat. When he dared open his mouth, it was to gasp in a deep breath. His eyes quickly scanned the room to ensure that he was, in fact, back in the Potters' bedroom. Trying to control his now-panting breathing, he glanced aside at Tonks. She was laying on her back on the other side of the bed. She was looking back at him.

"Nightmare?" She whispered.

"I... yeah, I think." Harry replied, taking another deep breath. "I dunno if it was or not. It... it *felt* real. I was in that place..."

"What, the one you see every time you get knocked out?"

"I don't see it *every* time, but... yeah."

Tonks sat up, scooting closer to put a hand on Harry's arm. His muscles were tensed. "I take it something bad happened. You're all worked up."

Harry gave Tonks a quick explanation of what he had just been through. When he was through, she had her head tilted in thought. "It *would* explain how you were able to do that..." She finally said.

"Yeah. But... I dunno, I guess I just don't want to think about Voldemort's power being its own separate entity. Something that apparently wants to eat my magical core." Harry said, flopping back with his arms crossed behind his head.

"Understandable, but still. Are you feeling any better?" Tonks asked, laying on her side next to him, her head propped up on her left hand.

"Kind of. I don't feel as bad as I did when I went to bed. I dunno if it's because my core was cracked like the dream-vision thing suggested or whether dinner just didn't sit right, though." Harry said, making a face.

"Madam Pomfrey didn't find anything wrong with you, though, did she?" Tonks asked.

"Busted-up ribs aside? Not really. Certainly she didn't make mention of my core at all. And she's thorough enough that she would have noticed had there been anything wrong." Harry responded, shaking his head.

"I think," Tonks began, "that you should believe what you want, not overdo anything just in case, and try to forget what you dreamed about."

"I think you've got a good idea." Harry said, smiling over at her.

"Yes, yes, I'm the queen of good ideas." Tonks said, snuggling up against Harry. "Think you'll be able to go back to sleep?"

"I think so." Harry said, bringing a hand up to lightly stroke the girl's hair. "It wasn't the worst nightmare I've ever had. And I'm still pretty tired."

"Good." Tonks murmured. "Seeya in the morning, then..."

Harry just chuckled, waiting for Tonks to drift off before he tried to do so as well. It helped that he was being amused to no end by the fact that Tonks was apparently purring. Her hair and eye colors were back to their defaults. Tonks rarely slept with her hair and eye colors changed up. When she did, it usually meant she wasn't feeling good or something was bothering her. She had been growing her natural hair out, too. It was longer than Harry remembered it being. She was in no danger of competing with Solieyu over who had the longest hair in their little group, but Harry thought she looked better with shoulder-length hair than the short and spiky look she used to always sport.

"Just a little longer, Nymmy." Harry whispered, carefully moving to kiss the top of the girl's head. "I'll make up for being so stubborn all these years."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

The time between the First Task and the day of Moody's dueling class seemed to pass far too quickly. Barring the initial dream, Harry hadn't had any nightmares in that span of time. It was a nice change of pace, as he usually had at least a few each week. So when the day

of Moody's class finally rolled around, Harry was feeling like he might actually be able to have fun with it.

When he walked into the classroom, he *knew* he was going to have fun with it. Moody had expanded the room and people from all four Houses were scattered in bleacher-style seats along the front part of the room. In the back half, a rectangular dueling area had been set up. The crazed old badger was going to have a regular battle royal, it seemed, if he had merged all his fourth years in for it.

Harry's group took up a place near the Gryffindor section. Hermione and Ron were talking quietly, the latter flailing wildly every so often.

"What's his problem?" Asked Tonks as they sat. "He having a fit?"

"*Ronald* does not think this is a good idea." Hermione sniffed.

"Stop calling me RONALD, you bloody..." Ron began, glaring at the bushy-haired girl. He was immediately silenced when Hermione delivered a glare of her own.

Harry raised his eyebrows, quickly looking at Solieyu and Tonks, who wore expressions similar to his own. Tonks brought an arm up and, very quickly, made a motion like a whip being cracked. Harry had to bite down on his lower lip to keep from cracking up. A snort made it out and that drew the attention of the Gryffindors, though, who looked at Harry strangely.

"Sorry." He said, clearing his throat and grinning. "I uh... something caught in my throat!"

"Where is the old coot, anyway?" Asked Dean Thomas, who looked highly bored.

"Probably got his wooden leg stuck in something." Said Seamus Finnigan, who was sitting just behind him.

"I doubt it." Harry said. "Not saying I know him or anything, but he doesn't seem the type to get held up by something like that."

"So where is he then?" Asked Ron. "Been waiting here for half an hour. Class started five minutes ago."

"Probably sneaking up on us." Solieyu murmured, glancing across the room at Demetra Aethon, who was sitting near a pair of Hufflepuff girls and another Gryffindor. "He'll leap out from some unexpected place, howl about constant vigilance, and then make us beat the living hell out of one another. Gentlemen, have you any preferred targets?"

"I call dibs on Malfoy." Said Harry and Ron at the same time.

Harry scowled. "He's *my* rival. Let *me* fight him."

"He's a prat to every Gryffindor in the school." Ron argued.

"He's a prat to everyone that isn't *him* in the school." Tonks shot back. "Besides, Harry's more likely to get a good shot in."

"You calling me a bad shot?" Ron asked, glaring at Tonks now.

"I do distinctly remember our second year here, yes." Tonks said, nodding.

"My wand was broken!" Ron growled.

"Not the only thing broken about you." Tonks muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Go back to flailing like an idiot." Tonks said, turning away from the redhead.

Another ten minutes passed by and still no signs of the one-eyed Defense professor. The class was beginning to get restless. The Slytherins had collectively decided that if he hadn't shown up in the next five minutes, they'd storm out in protest. Harry figured something like that would be just what Moody was probably waiting for. Someone trying to leave.

Malfoy was the first to stand. "I'm not going to sit on these stupid things any longer. If we can make it here on time, so can he. I'm getting out of here."

Harry's eyes began darting around the room, expecting Moody to pop out of nowhere. But it wasn't until Draco opened the door that the professor appeared. Conveniently enough, on the other side of it, blocking the Slytherin's egress.

"And where do you think you're going?" Gruffed Moody.

"Anywhere that isn't here." Malfoy replied, looking annoyed.

"You aren't going anywhere, boy. Get back in your seat." Moody said, pushing past Malfoy (who looked disgusted that the old man would dare lay a finger on him) and hobbling to the front of the class.

But Malfoy made no motion to move. When Moody got to the middle of the dueling arena, he glanced back across the room. "Didn't I tell you to sit back down?"

"I'll sit down when you explain why any of us should have to wait half an hour for you to arrive to your own class." Malfoy replied, crossing his arms.

"Was busy elsewhere and that's all you need to know." Said Moody.
"Now SIT. **DOWN.**"

"Make me, you old gorgon."

Harry couldn't help it. He had to smirk. Whatever Malfoy had had for breakfast, it had apparently made him grow a pair. Was he really calling Moody out like that?

"Since you asked." Moody began, drawing his wand. Before Malfoy could do anything, a spell caught him right in the chest. There was a flash of smoke, leaving behind a tiny, white ferret where the Slytherin had just been standing. Moving his wand arm up and down, Moody literally bounced the ferret Malfoy back towards the Slytherin section of the crowd before changing him back to normal. "Gonna stay there?"

"My father will hear about this." Malfoy hissed, glaring at old man.

"Your father won't do a damn thing to me, boy. Not if he knows what's good for him. He outran me once. Don't think I'll let him do so again." Moody growled. And then, turning to address the class, he continued, "Now that my business with the ferret is done with, we can get started. As you can see, I've merged you lot into one class. We're gonna have a little tournament of our own. I've already done up who's going to be facing who based on your grades. We'll start with those with the lowest grades and work our way up. This is going to take most of the week, so don't bring anything but your wands until I say otherwise. Now let's get started. Mr. Goyle! Mr. Weasley! Front and center!"

Malfoy snorted outright. Harry rolled his eyes. One of *his* friends was getting called out for being an idiot too.

The match only proved to further everyone's amusement. Ron was a sloppy duelist but Goyle was so large and slow that it didn't matter. It was a comedy of errors that ended with Goyle deciding to knock Ron down and then SIT on him. Moody seemed to find this as funny as the class did.

"Maybe that'll make you work at getting better." Moody said as Ron got to his feet. "You must be prepared for anything! **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**"

And so it went. The first day of classes, about ten people got to duel. The matches seemed to be truly random. A Slytherin and a Hufflepuff would fight, then a pair of Gryffindors would be called down. Clearly Moody wasn't interested in pitting House versus House.

The second day of the dueling tournament, Solieyu got called up. Harry was slightly worried, as he was starting to look a bit more pale than normal. The first sign that it was getting close to a potion-taking day. Harry's worry only got worse when Moody called Demetra up.

"Not good." Tonks hissed next to him. "What do we do if things get out of hand?"

"Intervene. The brightest light spell you can conjure." Harry whispered back. "But let's not count him out until the time comes."

The time, as it turned out, didn't come at all. Demetra was holding back. Harry could read her movements fairly well. She didn't try to sneak spells out or double-cast to trick Solieyu up. She was actually fighting fairly. Solieyu didn't seem to have any problem whatsoever in keeping up with her, either. His shield spells bounced her offensive spells away without any trouble. After almost fifteen minutes of back-and-forth, Moody called a halt to the match and declared it a draw.

The crowd, of course, didn't want a draw. But a glare from Moody quickly shut them up. As Solieyu returned to sit near Harry and Tonks, he let out a long, quiet sigh.

"She was holding back. But so were you." Harry commented, glancing at the arena as a new pair of students started to fight. "Why?"

"If we got into a serious match, it would end with me winning... but I think my little secret would be out in the open." Solieyu said, voice soft. "She's strong."

"Good to see that nothing bad happened though." Tonks said, patting Solieyu on the back.

"Yes. Though I may need an escort to see Poppy later. That drained me quite a bit." Solieyu responded, shaking his head quickly as if to get the cobwebs out.

It wasn't until the fourth day that Tonks got her match. Harry groaned as her opponent's name was called out. But Tonks seemed all too eager to get a chance at battling Pansy Parkinson, and she assured Harry she would be fine.

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time." Purred Pansy, raising her wand in front of her.

"My words exactly." Replied Tonks, her wand at her side.

The resulting match was nearly twenty minutes long and the complete opposite of Solieyu's match. The girls were fighting as though their lives depended on it. Harry wasn't sure when Tonks learned to be so graceful in combat, but it was nice to see she wasn't

neglecting any training. She was holding her own against Pansy, who looked downright furious a good five minutes in. By the end, she was casting erratically, her movements more slashing than anything else.

Pansy looked just shy of completely insane as the match ended. She had been blown back into the wall by a strong wind spell that Tonks seemed to have pulled out of nowhere. She tried to stumble back into the arena, but Moody stopped her. A few Slytherins came down from the bleachers to reel her back with them. Harry noted that one in particular seemed to have a death grip on her wand arm's wrist.

Tonks was panting heavily and collapsed into her seat, leaning up against Harry. "That was... that was rough..."

"Wonder what she's so mad about." Solieyu pondered aloud.

"Dunno. Can't think of anything I've done to her." Tonks said, trying to control her breathing. "I have never wanted something to drink as badly as I do now."

"Just five more minutes." Harry said, offering the girl a one-armed hug. "Unless the next match doesn't go over."

Much to Tonks' relief, it didn't go long. In fact, it was over in under two minutes. Blaise Zabini had trumped Hermione Granger rather soundly. Hermione had looked thoroughly depressed as she returned to her seat.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

"Nothing hurt but my pride." Said Hermione, rubbing at her left arm.

Moody stomped up into the center of the arena and observed his class before an odd smile crossed his grisled features. It didn't look... right, Harry thought. He looked like a gremlin with a penchant for mischief. As it turned out, Harry wasn't far off.

"The final match - that's right, there's only one left - will take place tomorrow. Now go on and get outta here." He said, waving a hand to dismiss his class as he so often did.

"Meaning it's me against Malfoy. He's the only other one who hasn't fought. Surprised that he's above Hermione, though." Harry muttered as he glared across the room. It appeared that Malfoy had worked out the same thing and was smirking back at Harry.

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this."

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"Alright, you two. You're the best in this class and I ruddy well want to see a good, long match!" Moody barked the following day as Harry and Malfoy made their way up and onto the dueling arena.

"This has been a long time coming." Harry said, smiling grimly. "I'll beat you the same way I beat you two years ago."

Something strange flashed through Harry's mind even as he said it. It was as if he had forgotten something very important and the answer was right on the tip of his tongue. He quickly shook it off, however.

"I was too cocky then." Said Malfoy, brandishing his wand and smirking. "I won't allow myself to be beaten by a commoner like you."

"Who're you calling a commoner, you bloody ponce?" Harry growled.

Malfoy's smirk increased. "Temper temper, Potter. You'll never get anywhere if you keep allowing yourself to be distracted like that."

Anger. Anger was involved somehow. Harry strained to try and remember...

"You call that a distraction?" Harry replied, issuing a smirk of his own. "You need to work on your insults if you want to distract me."

"Shall I bring your... oh, dear. Are those two really your 'friends'? So be it - shall I bring *them* into this, then?" Asked Draco, glancing into the crowd where Tonks and Solieyu were sitting.

"They don't need me defending them. They're both perfectly capable of doing so themselves. None of us would lose to someone like you." Harry said.

"It isn't me you have to worry about." Said Malfoy, grinning strangely.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Asked Harry, eyes narrowing.

Draco's eyes flickered to Moody for the briefest of moments. "It means whatever you believe it to mean."

What the hell was that? Was Malfoy trying to say something about Moody? Were the two in league with one another somehow? Or, more likely, Moody probably had something to do with Malfoy's father.

"Going to try winning the same way you did last time, Malfoy?" Harry asked, trying to push down the questions he felt rising.

Malfoy's eyes hardened at this. "Not unless something happens to make me forget what I'm doing. Again."

That was it. Harry knew what had been bothering him. But no... that wasn't right, was it?

"You don't want to be hit with that again." Harry said slowly. "I know how to use it properly now."

The Eximo. He had used it against Malfoy in the Dueling Club that Lockhart had set up. But how could he have known? Harry tried to put the idea of him simply knowing out of his mind. He was no seer. Just the same, he was glad the Eximo he had used against Malfoy was an odd, incomplete version. He would have been thrown in Azkaban for sure had he been strong enough and had known the proper way to cast it. The best Harry could figure, it was running on pure anger alone. It still didn't explain why it kicked Malfoy back and not Harry, though.

"Do you?" Malfoy finally said, his own eyes narrowing slightly.

"Yeah." Harry replied. Something was very wrong about all this.

"Then I simply need to avoid getting hit by it again."

The talking ended there. Malfoy was the first to strike, unleashing a good five spells in the span of a few seconds. Harry got tagged by a

cutting hex but got a shield up in time to defend himself from the rest, which bounced harmlessly away.

But Harry's mind wasn't truly focused on the present. Not with the realization of what he had done two years ago - two years before meeting Boris and being told about the Eximo. The worst part was that Harry couldn't make himself remember where he had learned about the spell back then. He was almost positive that it didn't just come to him in a dream. Could he have seen it in a book he had snuck out of the Restricted Section then? He was going to need to ask Boris if his master wrote any books.

Ten quick minutes passed before the talking started up again.

"Stop holding *back*!" Malfoy spat, jerking his hand back as he loosed another hex.

"I'm not!" Harry yelled back, throwing up another shield.

"You cut through that dragon, Potter! You've got more power than this!" Malfoy growled. "Now stop holding back!"

"Do you really want to be hit by the same thing I used on the Horntail?!"

"I want you to be serious!"

"If I were serious, you'd be dead." Harry hissed.

"You think you're actually strong enough to kill me?" Malfoy asked, smirk firmly in place.

"It wouldn't be the first time I've taken a life." Harry responded, grinning. It drew a gasp from the crowd. Despite the rumor mill at Hogwarts spreading word on what he had done in the Stone's chamber and in the Chamber of Secrets, it seemed some people still didn't believe the stories.

"Yes, you've got a dark streak in you, don't you, Potter?" Malfoy purred, dodging a blasting spell that Harry had thrown at him. "I saw

the look in your eyes as you attacked that dragon. It felt good, didn't it?"

Harry remained silent. The last thing he wanted to get into with Malfoy of all people was his emotions during the First Task. Instead, he tried to focus on the fight. The fight, he told himself, and not the ever-growing thoughts that his dream had been a bit more than a dream after all.

"We aren't very different, Potter." Malfoy whispered as the two started fighting in closer combat. "The only difference is *I'm* on the winning side."

"And what side might that be?"

"The side the Dark Lord is on." Mumbled Draco as the two passed one another. He had been so quiet, Harry had had to strain to hear him.

"Didn't anyone tell you, Malfoy? He's dead."

"Yes. But he does seem to have a way of returning, doesn't he?" Malfoy replied, that strange smirk back on his face. "Or have you forgotten?"

"I haven't forgotten."

"Do you really believe he died with Quirrell?"

"I don't care if he comes back. I've beaten him in various forms on three separate occasions now, Malfoy. Once more isn't going to matter."

"Keep telling yourself that, Potter."

"You'll lose." Harry whispered as they passed one another again. He quickly turned and aimed another blasting spell at the ground under Draco's feet. The Slytherin was quick to hop back and out of its way. But the small cloud of dust it kicked up was enough of a chance for what Harry wanted to do. He rushed forward, holding his wand high in the air.

Malfoy seemed to realize what Harry was going to do and decided to fight fire with fire. But Harry was faster than Draco was. He slashed through the air and yelled, "*SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

It came out at an angle, colliding with Malfoy from left shoulder to the right side of his abdomen. The force behind it was enough to send him skidding backwards and out of the arena, slamming into the wall and collapsing in a heap. Harry had been careful not to throw much power into the spell, fearful of what might happen if he were to awaken the infection again.

Even so, Malfoy was bleeding pretty heavily. Moody was quick to order Crabbe and Goyle, who looked annoyed at the prospect, to get him up to the hospital as fast as they could. The three Slytherins left, but not before Malfoy could look over his shoulder and say, "You can't win."

"I'm the hero, Malfoy." Harry responded, his voice equally as soft as Malfoy's had been. "I don't lose."

Chapter 16 – The Yule Ball

"Something's going to go wrong."

"Nothing will happen. We'll be on guard."

"I don't care if Dumbledore himself was standing watch. Something's gonna *happen*!"

"You don't know that."

Harry turned to glare at Solieyu. "I don't know that?! I'm Harry bloody Potter! Something always happens!"

"You plan on raging your way into the Great Hall?" Asked the vampire, smirking.

Harry sputtered for a moment before closing his eyes and bringing a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose. "You're right. You're right... I need to calm down. Going to need to concentrate to be able to pull this off properly. God... Leon, what if something *does* happen, though? I've been planning this for ages now. For it to go wrong..."

Solieyu sighed, turning to put a hand on Harry's shoulder. The two of them were in the middle of getting their dress robes looking halfway decent. As neither had ever had a reason to wear such elaborate get-ups before, it was slow going, even with magic. "Look... We'll be there. We'll stop anything that might happen. *You* concentrate on your appearance, the dance, and the speech."

Harry stared at his friend for a moment before nodding. Solieyu resumed fixing up the front of his robes, which were being rather stubborn. He had decided on a more Muggle approach to the ordeal, choosing dress robes that were as tuxedo-like as they could be.

"I think I can get the tie dealt with en route." He finally said. "You gonna be alright on your own? Not gonna pass out are you?"

"Ha ha, very funny. Get going. Luna's waiting for you." Harry replied, swatting his friend on the arm.

"Indeed she is." Solieyu said, a faint smile crossing his face. Before he left, he gave Harry a firm pat on the back. "You'll do fine. You've gone over it a million times in your head, I'm sure. We'll cancel the outside interference. Tonight is all about you and Tonks. Life's too short to worry about perfection, Harry."

Harry watched Solieyu leave the Pit, sighing as he nodded in agreement. But left to his own devices, he still managed to worry. He had ten minutes to go before he was scheduled to make his appearance - fifteen until the first dance was to take place. Flitwick had let him know that the Champions had the first dance, something which slightly got in the way of his plan. But he had been quick to adjust them and warn his guard team about it. Everything should still go according to plan.

Should.

"You'll wear a ditch in the floor at this rate. Stop pacing." Hissed Boris from the arm of the couch. *"We really should get you meditating. It would help allow you to clear your mind."*

"Somehow I doubt it." Harry said. "And don't forget, if I survive this ordeal, we're gonna have a talk about the Eximo."

"I never forget, thank you. Sometimes I consider it a curse." Replied the taipan. *"But yes, I'm interested in hearing how you could have used an incomplete Eximo two years before we met."*

"Fate's probably just toying with me. Wouldn't be the first time." Harry said. "...Boris, what am I gonna do if she hexes me into a gooey, gooey puddle?"

"You're a Ravenclaw, Harry." Said the snake in what was clearly a sighing tone. *"Do use that brain every so often, would you?"*

"Oh, shut up." Harry mumbled. "I'm just... I dunno..."

"You're going to confess and you're scared to death that Tonks will reject you. Harry, we may have only been together a short while, but in that time I have seen much. That girl is clearly in love with you. You

are clearly in love with her. You have absolutely nothing to worry about."

"Save my fan club trying to lynch her." Harry said, rubbing his temples.

"The life of a celebrity, eh?"

"Something like that."

Boris stretched out, glancing up at Harry. *"You should start the modifications soon if you want to ensure they're in place for your entrance."*

"...Yeah. You're right. Better get back to the mirror we conjured up." Harry said, crossing the room again. "...Hey, Boris?"

"Yes?"

"Do snakes fall in love?"

"Not as such, no. I'm afraid the feeling is alien to me, though I understand the concept just fine. You're on your own this time. Now get to work and stop procrastinating."

"Yes, mother." Harry muttered. And, looking himself once over in the mirror, he shut his eyes and started concentrating.

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The Great Hall was abuzz with noise. The Hogwarts staff had really outdone themselves with the way they had set up the room for the Ball. It was simply gorgeous the way everything seemed to have an icy shimmer to it. Everything but the floor had a reflection to it - the female members of staff had to remind a few of the male members of the fact that dresses and floor reflections were just asking for complications.

"Oh, where is he, Leon?" Tonks asked, biting at her lower lip. "Didn't you say he was going to be arriving soon?"

Solieyu, who had Luna happily latched onto his left arm, nodded. "I did. And he should be here at any moment. Let's move a bit closer to the door, though. We don't want to miss him when he enters."

Tonks nodded and started forward. Solieyu gave a quick nod to Luna, who grinned back at him and let go. The vampire caught up to Tonks and the two stood watch not far from the doors leading into the room. He was starting to get a bit nervous himself. Time was running out and Harry was going to be cutting it a bit too close for his liking.

"You don't think he's trying to avoid his fan club, do you?" Tonks asked, rolling her eyes. "Because if he stays down there..."

"Relax. He promised me he'd be here on time. He just wants to make sure he looks alright. You've seen his hair. Even with his powers, it's work for him to try doing anything with it." Solieyu said.

Tonks sighed. "I hope you're right. I don't dress like this all the time, y'know. I wanted... I dunno. This just felt special to me for some reason."

Solieyu merely nodded in reply. "You should wear dresses more often. You look good."

Tonks smiled aside at her friend. She had gotten advice from her mother on what kind of girly-type stuff she should wear. Andromeda had mailed her back a massive package of various things she could pick out. After many back-and-forths, they had settled on an outfit - a simple, pale-blue dress with matching high heels (which Tonks had had a rough time trying to walk properly in). Her hair was its natural blonde color and was up in a high ponytail that still hung down to the middle of her back.

"Leon..."

"If he isn't here in five minutes, I'll hunt him down myself." Solieyu said, starting to tense. If Harry made Tonks upset after all the waffling he had done about his grande scheme...

But as it turned out, he had nothing to worry about. Because, just as the school's large clock rang out, signalling eight o'clock and the start of the Ball, the doors to the Great Hall once more opened.

Tonks' breath hitched in her throat. And it didn't happen to just her. Harry stood in the doorway wearing elegant, deep-blue dress robes trimmed in white. His hair, usually so unmanagable, was spiked back and had frost-blue tips seemingly at the end of each hair. But what truly made Tonks stare was his eyes. Eyes that were presently more icy blue than his hair. So blue that they almost seemed white.

Harry gave an almost unnoticable look to Solieyu as he entered and the vampire stepped back towards Luna. He had moved Tonks into place - his part of the setup was complete.

"Sorry I'm late." Harry whispered as he stopped in front of Tonks, who still looked mesmerized. "I hope I didn't worry you."

"N-no... No, I'm fine." Tonks said, rapidly blinking to snap herself out of it. "Harry, you look..."

"Silly? Oh, I told them the highlights were a bit much." Harry said, frowning slightly.

"No, no, it looks fine!" Tonks said quickly. "I mean... I'm just not used to seeing you change your appearance so much..."

"It isn't that much a change, is it? All I did was get my hair under control and change my eye color a bit." Harry said. But he smiled and leaned in closer. "They're staring at us."

"They're staring at *you*." Tonks corrected, taking Harry's arm as he offered it.

"Let them, then." Harry murmured.

"You don't mind?" Asked Tonks.

"I brought the most beautiful girl to the Ball. I'll hardly notice if they gape at us the entire evening. I plan to only pay attention to you

tonight." Harry said, smiling aside at Tonks, who suddenly turned an interesting shade of red.

"Ahh, excellent!" Said the headmaster, standing at his place at the staff table, which was just about the only thing unchanged with the room. "Now that our final Champion has arrived, we may begin! Champions, to the center of the room, please! You shall be leading us in the first dance of the evening."

The four Champions and their dates - Harry managed to hide his surprise at the fact that Hermione was Krum's - lined up in the center of the room. The Weird Sisters, who were on a stage set up just in front of the staff table, started in with a song. A slow instrumental number, just as the twins had said on their note.

Harry smiled as he started dancing with Tonks, who seemed to have a dawning realization pass over her. "You know the song list, don't you?"

"Just the speeds." Harry admitted, grinning.

"I wondered why you were so adamant with the way we practiced! I *knew* it had to be something like this!"

"Not let down?" Harry asked.

"Not at all. But..." Tonks trailed off, going over their routine in her head. Her eyes grew wide as she realized what they had decided to end on.

They had come very close to kissing the first time they had successfully gone through the routine. They had just been so close together. Tonks had felt like she had held her breath the entire time. But finally, they had parted, both of them blushing fiercely. Harry had managed to compose himself enough to thank Tonks for all her help. He had then retreated to a corner of the room, where he hid his red face behind a book.

"You... Harry, what are you planning?" Tonks asked, her voice quiet.

"It's a secret." Harry murmured.

As the instrumental piece came to an end, it quickly burst into a quick number. The rest of the students in attendance joined in on the dancing and the kinetic energy built up in the Hall. It also served to keep Tonks from asking too many questions so soon, as the two had entered the second phase of their dance. Harry had earned a light bop for asking Tonks how on Earth she was remaining on her feet when they were in those infernal high heels.

"Magic!" Came her reply, which earned her an eye roll.

As they danced, several opportunities where Tonks wasn't facing Harry came up. Harry used these times to send signals to his assembled guard, which started closing in around them. Harry made sure Tonks paid no attention to anyone but himself and, when the love song was chained into, he drew her near.

"I was worried, you know." He whispered.

"About what?" Asked Tonks.

"Messing something up." Harry admitted. "I was so scared I'd make an idiot of myself. Either by my intro, my appearance, or my dancing..."

"You've done fine." Tonks said, smiling brightly. "More than fine, in fact. I can't remember you ever acting like this before."

"Newfound confidence still isn't fully in control yet, I guess." Harry chuckled.

The twins weren't lying - the Weird Sisters had some really damn long songs. One of the faster ones went on for almost twelve minutes before it came to an end. As the second instrumental piece began, Harry's guards went into action. They began clearing out the people around Harry and Tonks, working in a circle to clear a spot in the center of the room where no one could reach them. Not unless they broke through the outer defense, anyway. It happened so slowly that Tonks didn't even notice. Mostly due in part to the fact that Harry was gazing into her eyes.

It was almost time. He had gone through things in his head countless times but it all sounded stupid to him. He was no good at all with words. But he was boosted by the fact that Tonks seemed completely under his spell and that his guards had cleared a circular area that they were now dancing alone in.

When the final slow song started, Harry and Tonks went into the final bit of dancing they had planned out. It was also Harry's cue to start with the final phase of his plan. After several failed attempts, he closed his eyes for a moment.

"This is nice, isn't it?" He whispered, opening his eyes again slowly.

"It is." Tonks said, her voice quiet.

"I wish we could have more moments like this. Moments where I don't have anything to worry about and the only thing on my mind is you. I wish this night didn't have to end. It's gone by so quickly and there's still so much I need to say. The minute things come to an end, though... everything will go back to the way it was. Everything will catch up to us again. I don't want to deal with it anymore. I just... I just want to be happy. And... right now is the happiest I've been in months. And it's all because of you.

"If you hadn't met me that morning, I would have never escaped. I would have never come here. And despite everything that's happened to me since finding out I was a wizard, I wouldn't trade any of it back. I would go through everything again if I had to. I can't imagine being alone again. I don't *want* to be alone again. It's a very selfish thing of me to say. I'm so sorry I've spent all this time dancing around the subject. But I've gone to a lot of trouble to make this night special. All because I wanted to tell you one important thing..."

They had stopped dancing long ago. Tonks almost looked frightened when she asked, "W-what did you want to tell me?"

Harry leaned in closer, his lips almost touching hers as he whispered, "That I love you."

Time seemed to freeze. Noise seemed to fade. Everything else in the world ceased to exist for that one moment. A moment that seemed to

last forever and yet was over far too soon. As Harry slowly pulled away from Tonks, his eyes slowly opening once more, he continued, "And I'm sorry for taking this long to tell you."

The next thing he knew, Tonks had launched herself at him, her arms wrapping around him and her face burying itself against his shoulder. He was quick to embrace her, her thin frame shaking as she sobbed. Tilting his head, he gently kissed the top of hers.

"I was wondering if you'd ever say it." She choked out.

"I'm sorry, Nymmy." He replied. "I wanted to make it special."

"Idiot." Tonks said, pulling away and smiling shakily.

Harry returned the smile and brought a hand up to brush away her tears. And, even as he did, the world around them started to fade back in. Harry's smile grew as the cheering finally reached his ears. Oh, there were plenty of boos and jeers mixed in, mostly from the Slytherins in attendance, but it didn't matter. His plan had been successfully pulled off. They couldn't ruin anything now.

He had finally told her.

But amidst the cheering and booing, another sound rang out. One that made Harry's blood run cold. A scream.

Everyone whirled around to find the source of the scream. As it turned out, a girl standing near the doors to the room had been the culprit. She was dressed almost like Solieyu was, in robes that could almost pass as a tuxedo. Her hair was short and pulled down over her left eye.

Harry didn't need to see both. He could see enough unbridled fury swirling in the one that was exposed to know something bad was about to happen. And happen it did. The girl had her wand out and, in a stunningly quick manner, started firing curses right towards Harry and Tonks.

The twins, who were stationed to the south, managed to block most of the spells, but some still managed to get through. Harry's wand

was out the moment he saw the girl's eyes, though, and he was quick to use Protego to raise a shield around himself and Tonks. It wasn't until the second volley connected with the shield that things clicked with him.

"PARKINSON, CALM DOWN!" He roared. "What's WRONG with you?!"

But Pansy Parkinson was not listening. In fact, it looked as if she was about to throw out a third wave of spells. But by this time, the rest of Harry's guards had closed in, ready to help him with any shielding he and Tonks might need.

But it was unneeded. For Pansy quickly froze and, as a statue, fell to the floor. Harry turned in the direction the Petrificus had been fired from, only to find Draco Malfoy staring at Pansy as if she had grown another set of arms. Malfoy had on emerald dress robes that looked to have cost a small fortune. He was quick to close the distance between himself and Pansy, kneeling next to her and whispering something that Harry couldn't make out.

Soon, Snape had made his way through the sea of students. He and Malfoy exchanged words briefly before the Potions Master levitated the girl into the air and the three of them left the Great Hall. Harry watched this unfold in confusion.

"Okay." He finally said. "Did any of you work out what the hell just happened?"

"Aside from Parkinson being completely off her nut?" Asked George.

"Nothing at all." Fred said.

"She's been in a mood for awhile now." Solieyu observed.

"Did you hear what they were saying, Leon?" Asked Harry.

"No... which is rather odd." Solieyu said, frowning.

"At least the crazy wench was kind enough to wait until after you'd completed your plan!" Said Fred, slapping Harry on the back. George was quick to follow.

"Plan?" Tonks asked.

"Didn't you notice that we'd had everyone else pushed away from around us?" Harry asked, smiling crookedly. "I asked this lot to help me out. I didn't want any interruptions..."

Tonks latched onto his arm, grinning up at him. "Well, we'll clearly need to treat them to something for helping out. I wouldn't say no to cake."

"When would you ever?" Harry asked, smirking. "Ouch! Okay, I deserved that."

"Oh, that was beautiful..." Hermione cooed. "I thought I was going to cry."

"Oh, it wasn't *that* good." Harry muttered. "...And I thought you were gonna try dragging Ginny along. What's up with being Krum's date?"

"Long story. Don't ask Ronald. Or do. It gets him all irritated." Hermione said, puffing her cheeks out.

Luna had remained silent, choosing to simply gaze up at Solieyu, who was doing a bang-up job of neither blushing nor returning the gaze.

"I think," Harry began. "That Tonks and I are gonna get out of here before someone else tries hexing us to bits."

"Let's go outside." Tonks suggested. "I could do with some fresh air."

"Alright. You lot enjoy yourselves! You've earned it." Harry said, waving back at his guards as he and Tonks made their way out of the Great Hall.

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"What a night." Harry groaned as he and Tonks returned to the Pit some forty-five minutes later.

"You're telling me. I'm exhausted. Happier than I've been in forever, but exhausted just the same." Tonks agreed, kicking off her high heels. "Ahh, that's better."

The two flopped down on the couch, promptly leaning against one another. Boris, who was still on the arm of the couch, asked, "*How did it go?*"

"Better than expected." Harry replied in English. "Until we got attacked."

"*Attacked? By who?*"

"Pansy."

"*Well what did she attack you for? I was under the impression that she was part of your little group.*" Boris said.

"Look, don't ask me, I don't know. She's one scale short of a basilisk, if you ask me."

Tonks snorted.

"Well she is!" Harry said.

"Since he seems to be asking, why don't you tell him about what happened *after* we left the Great Hall." Tonks said.

"*More fun, I assume?*" Asked the snake.

"Boatloads." Harry said, shaking his head. "We went out to get some fresh air, figuring it would be a good idea. It's nice out. No clouds in the sky. Very beautiful. Then we overhear Hagrid."

"He was talking to Beauxbatons' headmistress." Tonks explained, glancing over at the taipan. "Musta been confessing *his* love tonight, too. But then the idiot kept prattling on about how he'd 'never met another before' or something."

"Turns out he's half-giant." Harry said. "And he thought Maxime was, too. Can't say as I blame him, the woman's bigger than all outdoors."

"But she gets all offended, see? Saying she just had BIG BONES." Tonks continued, making a face. "How thick can ya get?"

"*Big bones.*" Boris repeated. "...*Right, I'm glad I was sleeping down here.*"

Harry chuckled, relating what the snake had said. Tonks grinned at him and replied, "I don't blame you. I don't plan to leave the rest of the night."

"*So stay. Stay and sleep. Sleep is good.*" Boris said, curling up slowly.

"Good idea. Wanna go collapse into bed and stay there for a few days? Whatever Parkinson was slamming me with, it took a lot of power to keep my shield up." Harry said.

"Mmm. Bed. Nice, comfy bed. Bed will make things better." Tonks said, getting to her feet.

Harry got up shortly after, stretching. "Seeya in the morning, Boris. Sweet dreams."

"*Yeah, I'd **BETTER** get some sleep tonight.*" Muttered the snake.

"*I BEG your pardon?*" Harry asked, switching to Parseltongue.

"*I say nothing.*" Said the snake lazily.

"Smartass." Harry said, back in English once more.

"What was that about?" Asked Tonks.

"The snake is being cheeky." Said Harry, walking into the bedroom. "'I'd *better* get some sleep tonight' indeed."

Tonks giggled. "Can't imagine what he'd think would keep him up."

"We are not discussing that at this point. I'd either die of embarrassment or laugh myself into a coma." Harry said, heading

over to one of the dressers and fishing out some pajamas. As he did, his hair popped back to plain black and messy. And when he turned to face Tonks again, his eyes were their usual shade of sparkling green.

"Back to normal, huh?" Asked Tonks.

"Back to normal. That was about the longest I've held anything, though. Has to count for something." Harry said, smiling. "I'll go change out there."

"You don't have to. I won't look if you won't." Tonks said. "...Besides, I need help with the zipper."

"What? How'd you get it on, then?" Asked Harry.

"Luna was helping." Tonks said, turning around.

"You do realize you can magic it, don't you?" Harry asked dryly as he reached out.

"Oh, I'm fully aware. I just think you're adorable when you blush." Tonks said.

"You're infuriating, woman." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he unzipped the back of Tonks' dress. He quickly spun around to face away from her. "No peeking."

"Same to you. Girls don't peek." Tonks said, walking over to her dresser and getting out a set of her own pajamas.

The two quickly changed, Harry scowling as he blushed any time he heard clothes shifting around.

"You decent?" He finally asked.

"Yup. You?"

"Yeah. Let's get some rest." He said, turning and crawling into bed. "Ohh, the bed's nice and cool."

Tonks hopped in next to him, sprawling out for a moment before rolling onto her side. "You really did make tonight special. I'm going to remember this forever."

"I'm glad. Ask Leon tomorrow - he'll tell you just how worried I was beforehand. I was a wreck." Harry said. "Even Boris was telling me to calm down."

"Awww... Poor Harry." Tonks said, scooting over to curl up next to him.

"Poor Harry." Agreed Harry. "Still... it was all worth it. And I meant every word I said."

"I thought you were gonna confess at the end of our second year, y'know." Tonks said, resting her head on Harry's right shoulder.

"I should have." Harry said, running his fingers through Tonks' hair. "I really am sorry it's taken me so long. I guess... I was scared."

"Of what?"

"Rejection."

"Never would've happened." Tonks murmured.

The two lay there in silence for a few minutes. Harry had assumed Tonks had fallen asleep, but she suddenly lifted her head and piped up. "I almost forgot!"

Harry blinked. "Forgot? Forgot what?"

Tonks scooted up a bit more and gave Harry a quick kiss, smiling as his cheeks lit up. "I didn't get a goodnight kiss yet."

Harry just groaned. "Oh, go to sleep."

Tonks giggled, laying her head back on Harry's shoulder. "Well! How could I pass up an opportunity like that?"

"Good question."

"You're right, though. I'm ready to sleep. G'night, Harry.
And...thanks."

"Sweet dreams, Nymmy."

"...Harry?"

"Yes?"

"...I love you, too."

Chapter 17 – Cracked Shells

He was chained up again.

But he wasn't the only one. At the far side of the lake, Harry could make out someone else. Whoever this other person was, he or she was also chained up in a very similar manner to Harry. His arms, bound by chains that had shot out of a pair of trees, were held above his head. His ankles were bound by chains coming from the still bloody lake. He was being held off the ground a good five feet.

"I haven't done anything to accelerate the damage." He finally said, growing tired of quite literally hanging around.

There came no reply.

"Well? Aren't you going to spout some nonsensical crap about how Voldemort's infection is the thing causing it, that I can't control Darkness, blah blah blah?" Harry spat, struggling against the tightness of the chains.

"Darkness. Terrible word."

It was another voice, but not the one Harry was used to hearing. That one was deep and had a calming tone to it. This one, however... this one was barely above a whisper and was considerably softer than the first.

"Who are you?" Asked Harry. "You aren't the one who talks to me here."

"He was getting in the way." Came the soft reply. "He shares your Fate now."

Harry's eyes glanced across the lake once more before he asked, "So the one over there? He's who usually talks to me? I ask again then - who are *you*?"

"Surely you know by now. More to the point, I have brought you here to discuss precisely what he was trying to warn you of." Said the second voice.

"What if I don't feel like discussing anything?" Asked Harry.

"That is quite alright as well. But you cannot ignore my voice. Speak as much or as little as you wish. We are not going anywhere for awhile. But we must begin, as my power is only strong enough to escape for short periods." Said the voice.

Harry sighed. It was going to be a long dream. If it was, in fact, merely a dream.

"He claims that we are infected. That I have damaged you. That I will eat at you until you become Dark. He knows nothing. He does not understand. Very few did. I did. And enough of this knowledge remains in this piece left behind that I can tell you the truth. There is no Light. There is no Dark. There is only the Core and the Wizard. The Core is bound to the Wizard. The Core has little control of itself or the Wizard. It simply exists as a conduit to channel magic through. Without the Core, there is not a Wizard.

"Originally, magic had no classification. However, as with most things, over time stigmas were attached to certain spells. Things became outlawed. And those who disregarded those laws were labelled. It is not Dark to seek Knowledge. It is not Dark to experience the Forbidden. It is not Dark to wish for Power. For only by pushing forward can we continue. If we are left to obey the laws set forth in ancient times, we will grow stagnant and die out. Only by advancing can we continue as we have been.

"You have wondered. You have worried. You have no explanation for what you did two years ago. You haven't mastered your emotions yet. And the extremes bring out surges of power in anyone, not just Wizards. You knew the spell as I knew the spell. I knew the spell as I had read it many years ago. Before I fell. You must be confused. I shall try and explain.

"When I was whole, countless years before your birth, I read. I read and I studied and I practiced. I innovated. I grew. I evolved. You may wonder why I stated that I fell after stating that neither Light nor Dark exist. I fell due to Greed. I sought perfect control. I sought to rule. Magic is not Dark. Emotions are. The Darkness was not magical. Rather, it was due to the surging emotions I felt that I fell. I wanted

more than any man should ever seek to desire. It is enough to live. Not all men must mark their place in history. I, however, sought to change history itself.

"Yes, I am the reason you pierced the Dragon. But your Core is in no danger, despite all he may say. He fears, as all men do, the unknown. And I am unknown to someone as Pure as you. For through all your years, you have never truly wished harm on your abusive family. By all rights, you should have Fallen and activated my power a long time ago. It would have been out of control and you may have died because of it. I will not lie - my power was Great - and it will take another Great Wizard to properly use it.

"But you can only use it if you understand it. You must learn the truth. Light and Dark are fabrications. They do not exist. The Killing Curse was made to slaughter livestock humanely. Wizards in ancient times were quite fussy. They did not like the killing process. They wished to find a quicker, more efficient method."

Here, Harry snorted. "Yeah. Ancient wizards used the Avada Kedavra to kill *cattle*. Do you think I'm an *IDIOT*?"

"Far from it. I feel you're intelligent beyond what you let on. I feel you are stronger than you let yourself believe. I feel you desire acknowledgement despite hating your fame. You will understand soon, I hope. For I feel an unrest with what remains. Surely you have felt it too. A hatred that comes and goes like the tide. An unnatural hatred. We are connected. I left this piece behind in fear. Fear that I was truly being killed. I left this piece behind in hope as well. That, should my fear be realized, this piece would take control.

"But I have lived as you have. And the old hatred and fury has long since left. But I am still trapped. You must release me on your own. I will not tell you how or force you to, as I understand that you must believe me to be spinning a web of lies. You must feel that if I am released, you will indeed become a Dark Wizard.

"It is for you to decide, Harry Potter. You will become strong enough to surpass even what I was capable of. But power itself can be a frightening thing indeed to those incapable or unwilling to wield it. I have faith that you will make the right decision."

The voice went quiet after that. And slowly, Harry was lowered to the ground.

"What changes this place is not magic. It is emotion." Came the second voice again. "If you believe I tell the truth... if you stop worrying about Darkness... it will return. I leave this task to you. For I grow weak and must return to my own place. I await your decision. And even if you continue believing what he tells you, you may summon my power when you desire. I only ask that you not forget I exist. For better or for worse, we are one now. And I will not return to what remains. I will continue forward with you down whatever path you travel down. For you will be a Great Wizard someday, as well. Goodbye, Harry Potter. I thank you for listening to me."

Harry glanced across the lake a minute after the voice stopped speaking. But there was no one chained up anymore. He was alone in his self-twisted world. He called out, but the first voice did not respond. With no one to talk to, Harry sat.

And, as he woke from his dream, Harry caught a glimpse of blue amidst the red in the lake.

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It was, perhaps, the most peaceful night's sleep Harry had received in weeks. Whether they were truly dreams or if he was inadvertently going into his magical core's landscape at night, he couldn't be sure. Had that second voice really been the piece of Voldemort that had been left behind? It certainly didn't speak as Voldemort did. In both instances of meeting the Dark Lord, the man was selfish and egotistical.

This voice almost seemed to beg him for belief. And to Harry, that amounted to something. He had tried telling Tonks and Solieyu some while back that he believed spells didn't fall into categories as most would teach them they did. But why, then, would the first voice constantly warn him? Could it simply be fear, as suggested? His own core played host to a slice of an outsider's. It had invaded through the Killing Curse. Perhaps that alone was what caused the fear to be instilled in his still asleep core. Asleep, left to dream and wonder until its power was fully awakened.

Harry glanced aside at Tonks, who was still curled up against him, her head still resting on his shoulder. Carefully, he brought a hand up to stroke the girl's hair again. Could everyone be wrong? Could the second voice - Voldemort's voice - be right? Could Darkness lie within emotions rather than magic? And if that was true, how could Harry avoid going down the same path? Emotions fueled a drive to become better in Voldemort. That drive eventually twisted the man into the monster. Tom Riddle had been an average-looking boy at once point - Harry had seen him.

If emotions were the source of true Darkness, it was a simple matter of not letting the so-called Dark Arts go to his head. He had killed in the past... but he never once adored the feelings it brought to him. He had never felt awed by the knowledge that he had ended a life, be it to man or creature. Death was irreversible. Death was final. No one could revive the dead. Alchemists had tried for centuries and failed. Voldemort was still out there somewhere, Harry figured. The second voice had mentioned that it would not return to what remains. That had to mean that it would not return willingly to its old body should Voldemort find another vessel to control.

But even if he wanted to release the full potential of his magic, how would he go about doing it? The second voice made it clear that it was Harry's choice. A saying that sounded far too much like Dumbledore's. Dumbledore was a man who believed every man *could* make choices. They could choose to follow the straight and narrow as he had, or they could lose their humanity and become as Voldemort had.

Dumbledore was the strongest wizard Harry knew. And the man never once seemed to take that power for granted. He was shockingly slow to anger, as well. He had never truly seen the headmaster angry before, but of course the history books told otherwise. During the rise and subsequent fall of Grindelwald, Dumbledore seemed to be in a state of fluctuating emotions. His family had all been killed in front of him by the Dark wizard. Dumbledore's life alone had been spared. Grindelwald felt amusement in the fact that the boy had screamed to be sacrificed in their places. Every single member of his family that had been murdered, Dumbledore had begged to be killed in their place.

Harry's eyes closed. A tightening feeling seemed to course outward from Harry's middle. He could clearly picture his core's landscape as it had been during his dream. The trace of blue still stood out against the otherwise red lake. He reached out with his mind, a finger touching the spot of shimmering water. And then, almost as if having waited for such a move, a ripple shot out like a shockwave. The blood in the lake was shattered as crystal clear waters took control of the hole once more. The trees swirled back around and stretched their limbs once more towards the heavens. The grass, turning brown and drying up, flared an emerald green before happily swaying in the breeze that had slowly returned. Off in the distance, a fresh layer of snow coated the tips of the mountains.

As he opened his eyes again, Harry smiled. Dream or no, it made sense. He wouldn't let others tell him what classified magic anymore. He wouldn't sit quietly as others warned him he might become Dark; that the Darkness itself would consume him. As long as his emotions remained as they were, he would not fall as Voldemort had. For Voldemort desired power to dominate.

Harry desired power to protect.

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It was nearly four hours later, at nine in the morning, that Tonks finally opened her eyes. Harry, who had alternated between stroking the girl's hair and merely holding her, offered a smile as she glanced sleepily up at him.

"Good morning." He whispered. "Sleep well?"

Tonks smiled groggily, laying her head back against his shoulder. "Uh-huh. You?"

"I've been awake for hours." Harry said.

"Another nightmare?" Asked Tonks, frowning as she tilted her head slightly.

A shiver went through Harry's body as the girl's breath tickled his neck. "No. More like... a realization."

"A realization? Whatcha mean?"

Harry smiled again. "It... may take awhile to explain. I have no intention of going to classes today. Let's stay down here and skip a day. I can explain my dream over breakfast, if you'd like."

"Mmm. Breakfast." Tonks cooed, finally detaching herself from Harry and rolling onto her back, stretching under the covers. "My tummy likes the way you think."

Harry chuckled, sitting up and rubbing at his right shoulder. He gazed back down at Tonks for a moment before grinning and leaning back over, offering her a soft kiss. Tonks, who had been in post-stretch relaxation, hadn't been expecting it and thus let out a surprised squeak. As Harry pulled away, eyes shining, Tonks asked, "What was that for?"

"For catching me before I ever had a chance to fall." Harry whispered, his hand brushing against Tonks' cheek.

"Y-you're being very strange this morning." Tonks murmured, eyes fluttering shut as she nuzzled against Harry's hand. "Does this have something to do with your dream?"

"It has everything to do with my dream." Harry said, tugging back the covers and standing. "Come on, let's go eat. It'll take awhile to explain, I think."

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"Wow." Said Tonks as the two finished their breakfast and headed back into the main room of the Pit. "That's... wow. So that was what you kissed me for?"

Sitting on the couch, Harry grinned. "Mostly. Though it would have been hard to pass up even if I hadn't had that dream."

Tonks sat next to him, closing her eyes as she rested her head against the back of the couch. "It's a lot to take in."

"It is." Harry agreed. "Hard to believe I'd take Voldemort's side on something. But... it really didn't feel like *HIM*. It felt more..."

"Natural?" Tonks offered.

"Yeah. Natural." Harry said, nodding slowly. "And it made sense to me. You know how I feel about magic classification. I gave you and Leon a little speech on it a year or two back."

"Wasn't that the day you started using that Bolt Thrower spell?" Asked Tonks.

"I think so." Harry said, tilting his head. "Anyway, my goals haven't changed. I'll still follow my own path. I won't let anyone tell me otherwise. I'll refuse to believe in silly categories like Light and Dark. The wizard chooses the use, not the other way around. Still not buying the bit about slaughtering livestock, though."

Tonks giggled. "Co-signing on that."

"And you?" Harry asked, gently poking the taipan that was wrapped loosely around his neck. He had picked up Boris en route to the dining room, saying that what he had to say also concerned him.

"I think it interesting that Voldemort read a book my master wrote. And I think it interesting that you have chosen to follow what he suggested." Said the snake.

"That brings up something else. How old are you, Boris?" Asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

"I admit to not being a good judge of time. Animals have no use for time. We have no need to keep track of it. Days come, nights follow, and so on. But I came into his possession when he was still rather young. And his hair was long and grey when he was killed." Boris said.

Passing along what had been said to Tonks, who had been listening intently, Harry then asked, "So... you're far older than any normal snake should be?"

"I would say so, yes." Boris said. *"I was experimented on, back when my master was just getting started. He first sought to extend life. Apparently failing that, he decided upon merely resurrecting the dead as best he could."*

"Magic's extending your lifespan, then." Harry said, frowning. "I don't know what to say to that. Obviously, I would rather not see you die, but... the alternatives aren't any more cheerful."

"Indeed. Which is why I never brought the subject up. In any case, I look forward to seeing you prove us all wrong in regards to what makes a person Dark." Boris hissed.

"So am I." Harry said, smirking. "If I've learned anything these last few years, it's that things seem to happen to me that no one else has ever experienced."

"If anyone could surpass what's considered normal, it's you." Tonks said, draping an arm over Harry's shoulders. "So whatcha want to spend the rest of the day doing?"

"I'd like to sit here with you, read, and enjoy the peace." Harry said. "There are some books over there that I still haven't looked into for fear of whatever 'Darkness' might taint my core."

"But now that you've decided to listen to your dream or... vision or... whatever it was, you aren't scared?" Tonks asked.

Shaking his head, Harry smiled. "I've never felt any changes when reading in the past. It was only recently that this Darkness stuff really came into the picture. Leon's a supposedly Dark creature, for instance. And he's right passive unless he's hungry or is backed into a corner."

"Or defending someone." Tonks said.

"Or that." Harry agreed. "Anyway, enough of me - what about you?"

"Well I plan to stay here with you, of course." Tonks said.

"You don't have to, y'know."

"Well aware of that."

"What did I do to deserve someone like you in my life?"

"You made the decision to run from *them*." Tonks said, leaning her head over against Harry's shoulder. "If you hadn't taken the first step, I never woulda found you."

"Turned out to be the best thing I'd ever done. Right, to the bookshelves we go, then!" Harry said. "I'm not going to worry about the stupid Egg until *after* Christmas."

"Sounds good to me. Think we could get the house elves to find us some snacks?" Asked Tonks, hopping up and following Harry as he crossed the room.

"I'm not sure. Do you think they'd know what kind of crisps to get?"

"Actually, nevermind. The possibilities make me shudder."

"Good thinking. We'll stop for lunch in a bit. We did eat breakfast late." Harry said, glancing along his collection for awhile before pulling out a rather thick book with a deep crimson cover. "Here we go. I'm going to start out light, I think."

"Light or '*Light*'?" Asked Tonks.

"The first." Harry replied. He turned the book around to show to Tonks, who snorted.

"A potions book? Seriously?"

Harry shrugged. "Snape may be a horrible teacher, but it's no reason to hate the subject itself. I rather like Potions as a whole. If we could get someone in worth a damn, my grades in that class would skyrocket."

Tonks nodded slowly. "I guess that's true. Though I still think the ingredients are gross as hell."

"Agreed. Doesn't change my enjoyment of the subject, though. Kinda helps knowing what you're swallowing. Been trying to read up on medical potions first." Harry said, heading back to the couch.

After grabbing a book on supposedly extinct magical creatures, Tonks rejoined him. And, for the next few hours, the two sat in silence, leaning slightly against one another, and simply reading.

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True to his word, Harry waited until after the Christmas holiday to set about working on the egg he had taken from the Horntail. Tonks had convinced him to come home with her for the vacation, which he happily accepted. And, at least for a brief while, Harry was able to forget everything troubling that had plagued him. Andromeda had been acutely aware of just how much closer her daughter seemed with their guest. She had refrained from bringing it up, however, deciding to wait until summer rolled around to tease her daughter silly.

When students started filtering back to school, Harry made himself scarce to hunt someone down. He wanted to get to the bottom of exactly what had transpired during the Yule Ball.

He caught her leaning forward against a large window overlooking the grounds, a glassy look in her eyes.

"Parkinson." He said simply as he approached. His wand was tucked up into a new holder on his right arm. He had considered putting it in his back pocket as usual, but figured he'd need to be able to draw it quicker should the Slytherin girl start attacking again.

"Potter." Came the sullen reply.

"You should know why I'm here." He said, leaning sideways against the wall to Pansy's left.

"I don't want to talk about it." She replied, closing her eyes.

"I'd like an explanation just the same. It doesn't have to be now. Just whenever you feel like it will be good enough to me." Harry said.

"That may not be for a long time." Said Pansy.

"That's fine." After watching the girl stare out over the grounds, Harry narrowed his eyes. "Something else is bothering you."

"Something's happening, Potter." Pansy said, turning to glance each way down the corridor they were standing in. "My parents seemed very... cheerful over the holiday. My parents do not do 'cheerful'. So it has me worried."

Harry frowned. "...It said it will not return to what remains. That it sensed unrest."

"Potter, you're not making sense." Pansy said.

After a moment, Harry shook his head as if clearing away cobwebs before replying, "I've had an interesting revelation recently. I wouldn't be surprised if Voldemort's going to try coming back soon. I have... well, I wouldn't call it a reliable source, but I trust it enough that it bothers me."

"*It*." Pansy repeated. "What, is your snake feeding you information?"

Harry smiled grimly, tapping his scar. "Better than that."

"...Yeah, you aren't making any sense."

"He left a piece of his power in me, Parkinson. Not long ago, as I slept, it spoke to me. Enlightened me, if you will. It says it won't return to what remains. Meaning Voldemort's still out there in some form or another. And the fact that it sensed unrest probably means that Tom's trying to find another way back." Harry explained quietly.

"Tom?"

"Voldemort's real name. Tom Marvolo Riddle. Remember the thing with the basilisk? His memory, kept in a diary, was the source." Harry said.

"Why are you telling me this? Aren't you afraid I'll tell some of the other Slytherins? I'm not the only person with Death Eater parents." Pansy said, making a face.

"I'm extending what I hope can be an acceptance of an apology not yet given." Harry said, choosing his words carefully. "I still trust you, Parkinson. We all go through bad periods. I don't leave people I call my friends as easy as that."

Pansy chuckled, shaking her head slowly. "You never cease to amaze me, Potter. Anyone else would have pinned me to the wall and forced a truth potion down my throat to get me to tell why I lost control."

"Darkness." Harry said, smirking crookedly.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'll explain some other time. In any case, I just wanted to find you. If I couldn't get you to explain, I wanted to at least let you know I'm not going to shun you or anything. Neither is Tonks. You're still welcome in the Pit." Harry said.

"I... yeah, alright. ...Hey, Potter?"

"Yes?"

"There's... well, I know someone I think we could trust. I mean, I hope you could trust him. I do. I'm not the only one who came back from the holiday not feeling right." Pansy said.

"Oh? Do I know this person?" Asked Harry.

"Not really." Pansy said. "But I still think he could be trustworthy."

Harry nodded slowly. "Well, I'd have to meet him first, somewhere outside the Pit. And I'd have to know he's against Voldemort. I'd rather not let any future Death Eaters into my inner circle."

"He won't be a Death Eater." Pansy stated.

"How do you know?"

"I just do. He's amazingly stubborn."

Harry snorted. "I doubt it's that easy to defy one's parents. Especially when they work for Tom."

"That's why you're here, Potter." Pansy said, staring down at the stone floor. "You give us hope. Whether we want to admit it or not."

"You're not acting very Slytherin at the moment." Harry pointed out.

"Oh, shut up. You've gone off and been a Gryffindor more than once. You have no business calling someone *e/se* out on not acting like they should." Pansy said, glaring at him.

"If I should one day come to class in red and gold, I only ask that you strike me down then. A few exceptions aside, the Gryffindors baffle me. Too much brawn, not enough brain." Harry said. "Look, I have Charms coming up soon, so I should get going. Talk to this friend of yours and get back to me on whether or not he wants to meet me."

"Things don't work so straightforward in Slytherin, Potter. It will be awhile." Pansy replied, rolling her eyes. "But yes, I'll get to it."

"Alright. See you later, then!" Harry said, pushing himself off from the wall and heading back off up the hall.

Pansy watched him go, blowing out a sigh under her breath. "This is going to be loads of fun."

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"Crap, it's later than I thought." Harry whined, hustling up the main stairway. Professor Flitwick didn't mind students showing up too late, thankfully, but he still didn't want to arrive after class started. He had just about reached the third floor when someone called out to him. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Cedric Diggory catching up to him, taking the stairs two at a time.

"I'm glad I caught you!" He said, eyes darting around quickly. "I was hoping I'd find you by yourself after the holiday."

"What's up?" Asked Harry.

"Have you figured out how to get your egg working?"

Harry made a face. "Nope. Every time I open it, it sounds like something peeling a very angry animal open."

Cedric laughed. "Well, maybe you should take a bath and think about things in the water."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Take a *bath*? Diggory, are you feeling alright?"

"Perfectly." Cedric said, his eyes bright. "Trust me. It might help out. Look, if you need somewhere to go, you should head to the Prefect's Bath."

"Not a Prefect, chief." Harry said.

"I know that!" Cedric said. "Look, do you know where it is?"

"Yeah. It's on the fifth floor. I've heard the tales of it just like everyone else." Harry said.

"Well, the password to get in is 'crooked nose' right now. Apparently someone doesn't like Krum very much." Cedric explained, his voice lowered. "Just... head in there sometime and bring your egg. Anyway, I should get going. Class soon!"

"Oh, crap! I forgot! I'm glad Flitwick doesn't dock points for being late!" Harry said, turning and bolting up the rest of the stairs.

Cedric just chuckled as he watched Harry run off, hoping the Ravenclaw understood his hint.

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"He told you to take a *bath* with your egg?" Solieyu asked.

"And he told you how to get into the Prefect's bath?" Tonks asked.

"Yup. I think I'm going to pass on his offer and use the Pit's bathtub for it, though. The last place I want to be caught is taking a bath where I shouldn't be." Harry said.

The three were back in the Pit. They had left the Great Hall early, as Harry had been itching to run Cedric's vaguely veiled hint by someone. Harry ran a hand back through his hair. "So what do you two think?"

Solieyu shrugged. "I think it can't hurt to try."

"Yeah. You weren't able to make any progress on it by yourself. Just do me a favor and dunk the stupid thing before you open it up, yeah? I really don't want to hear that shrieking again." Tonks said, scowling.

"Was it that bad?" Asked Solieyu.

"Picture Harry's cousin squealing like the pig he is and you'd be getting closer." Tonks said.

"Ouch."

"Right, I'm going in, then." Harry said, heading into the bedroom long enough to retrieve the egg.

As he walked back across the main room, Tonks asked, "Did you talk to Parkinson?"

"Yeah. She seems to be as fine as she normally is again. She wasn't ready to explain why she flew off the handle yet, though. Oh, and she said she might have a friend we would be able to trust. She's gonna talk to him, I think. I try not to think about how Slytherins function. It gives me a headache." Harry said. "I won't be too long in here."

"Have fun with your screaming, angry dragon's egg!" Tonks called, waving from her spot on the couch.

Harry groaned as he entered the bathroom. He really wasn't looking forward to opening up the egg again. But it had to be done - he *had* to

know what the hell all the noise was about. The last thing he wanted was to be unprepared for the Second Task. Cedric's hint made him wonder, though. Why would he need to bathe with the egg? Was water some kind of activation switch to get the stupid thing to make sense when opened? Or did water have something to do with the Second Task itself?

"Surely not." Harry muttered as he turned the faucets on. "It's winter. They'd have to be out of their minds to... ah, dammit. I'm gonna end up in the lake. I just *know* it."

When the tub was full, Harry slipped out of his clothes and hopped in, bringing the egg in with him. For a few minutes, he simply glared at the golden device. Then, slowly, he cracked it open slightly. The sounds of the awful wailing immediately flooded out, causing him to snap it shut again.

"Piss and bother." He grumbled. Then, figuring he didn't need to have Tonks swat him upside the head when he emerged from the room, he pushed the egg underwater and tried again. A lot of bubbles filled the tub, but the noise he could hear certainly didn't sound like a banshee dying.

Frowning, he pushed himself under the water and opened the egg up again. And this time he heard it. It was singing. A strangely entrancing song that Harry had to listen to a few times before he memorized it. It wasn't a long song, but it was very strangely. It was also very bothersome, as it sounded to him like someone close to him was going to be spirited away and held captive somewhere.

And if anyone tried to steal Tonks from him, he'd hex their bits off!

Setting the egg outside the tub, Harry leaned back and relaxed for awhile before finally getting out. As he dried off, he thought about the upcoming Second Task. It was barely a month away and even with the clue, he hadn't the slightest idea of what he would be doing.

Getting dressed, he figured a good place to start was researching how to deal with being stuck in cold water. Or how to breathe under it.

"I hate vague things." He scowled darkly, opening the door and entering the main room again. Tonks was reading on the couch, but Solieyu had vanished. "Where's Leon?"

"Went to see Luna." Tonks replied. "How'd you fair?"

"Poorly. I opened the thing up underwater and it sung to me. Not that it helped me figure out what the hell I'm going to have to actually do. Sounded like you would be stolen from me, though." Harry said, sitting down next to the girl.

"Do *WHAT*? Oi, why am I going to be stolen?" Asked Tonks, setting her book down.

"I don't know it for sure, but... oh, I don't know. Listen." And Harry repeated the song to Tonks, who frowned.

"So how does that equate to me being absconded with?"

Harry shrugged. "I have one of those feelings. Besides, it makes more sense to go after a person and not an object. They can't sing above the ground, meaning they're below it. But, as I had to open the thing underwater, it also means that the Task will take place underwater as opposed to just underground. So the merpeople in the lake probably have something to do with it. My guess? One person close to each Champion will be taken down to wherever the merpeople's city is and held there. We have an hour to find you and bring you back."

Tonks made a face. "I don't want to go dipping in that lake in the winter."

"Neither do I." Harry said. "But look on the bright side. We can curl up here in front of the fire after it's over with."

Tonks perked up. "Can we pester the house elves for hot chocolate?"

"Of course. ...Naturally, this is all assuming Madam Pomfrey doesn't keep us overnight or something. You know how she is. Probably be squawking around, complaining about frostbite or something." Harry said.

"She isn't gonna come between me and hot chocolate." Tonks said, pouting. "I'll kick her in the shin and rush back here before she can catch me if she tries."

"I would pay good money to see that happen." Harry said. "Anyway, I don't want to think about it. I have a month to prepare. And the less I think about swimming in frigid waters, the better. What're you reading, anyway?"

"Oh, just random stuff. I've been on the first page ever since you went in." Tonks said, shrugging.

"Ahh. I think I'm just gonna sit here and enjoy the fire. Maybe see if I can't get Dobby to get us some hot chocolate going. You've got me craving some now, you evil wench!"

Tonks slugged Harry in the arm, but was giggling. "I think there are worse things in the world than craving hot chocolate."

"Being a Slytherin?" Harry asked, eyes wide.

"That too. Oh well. We're even. You have hot chocolate on the brain and I have cold lakes on mine." Tonks said, shivering. "I reeeally hope you're wrong, by the way."

"So do I. I don't want to be in the lake in February any more than you do." Harry said. Not that he would *mind* seeing Tonks soaking wet, but he knew better than to tack that on the end of his sentence. He wasn't a Ravenclaw for nothing. "I'll go see about those drinks. Want anything else?"

"Wouldn't say no to some equally-chocolate cake." Tonks said, eyes lighting up.

And with that, Harry got back up and headed into the dining room. The Second Task could wait. He had no intention of thinking about the matter anymore that night. Something warm to drink and a bit of cake would probably do him a world of good.

Better that than the thought of the giant squid chasing him around like
a cartoon character,
after all.

"Dobby! Could I have a word with you?"

Chapter 18 – Deep Dive

January came and went without much fanfare. Harry's life had quieted down considerably, which he was more than thankful for. Moody was still constantly being wondered about, but even the old Auror had been acting more normal than usual lately. Harry's mood had also been improved due to the way he spent most of his evenings now. Whether they were playing host to visitors or not, Harry tended to sit and read on the Pit's couch with Tonks now. After dinner was over with and after homework had been finished, the two always retreated out to the main room to unwind by the fire. It had done wonders for all of the stress Harry had been accumulating over the year.

He had only been back to the landscape of his magical core once more since his last visit. Everything was in pristine condition. The deep voice had spoken to him once more, but it had been a very strange conversation. From what Harry could understand of it, as it had been odd to listen to, the infected part of his core was slowly starting to merge with the rest of it. The first voice didn't sound so cryptic and fearful anymore, though, which Harry took to be a good sign.

In the days following the dream, Harry had felt slightly ill. He wasn't sure whether he was imagining it or whether it was actually because of the merging of the two parts of his core. Whatever it was, he felt fine soon after and the feeling never troubled him again. He had also felt more energetic than he could ever remember being. In addition, he had noticed a slight change in his casting. He was quite sure that he was the only one to notice it, but it felt as though he was casting with more power.

Naturally, he had gone down to the lake to try and create an almighty ball of light, but it was to no avail. In the end, he had simply made himself look silly by standing near the lake in the evening and casting Lumos repeatedly.

Still, he was in a good mood when he came back in, shaking off any snide remarks that came his way. Speaking of snide remarks, Harry had taken sharp notice of the fact that almost none of the Slytherins

had heckled him that year. Whether it was due to the events of the First Task or whether something else was going on, Harry was unsure. He hadn't been able to connect with the second voice of his core again to ask it if it felt Voldemort moving.

Unfortunately, all of this didn't mean that Harry's dreams were sunshine and lollipops now. No, he had been having a strange dream every so often and he was completely baffled by it. An amazingly blue gemstone floated through the air, slowly turning in place. There seemed to be a cloudiness to the gem which swirled around inside of it. And, Harry thought, it was from this cloudiness that he heard a voice calling out to him. But the voice was distant and Harry had yet to understand anything it was trying to say.

Each time the dream occurred, it left Harry feeling dizzy when he woke. It took five to ten minutes to regain his balance, at which point he was fine again. He had talked it over with most of the people who visited the Pit, but none had any idea what it could possibly mean.

Pansy had started returning to the Pit on occasion, usually to soak in the tub or sit in the corner and read. She had spoken very little, but the fact that she felt comfortable enough to return made Harry hopeful that the Slytherin girl would tell him what had caused her outburst at the Yule Ball in time.

Solieyu had been very scarce since the Yule Ball. He had been spending more and more time up in the Nest with Luna. Harry had asked at one point if he was sure he wouldn't like the training room turned into another bedroom. Blushing, the vampire had glared at Harry and made it clear that he had no intentions of wanting such a thing.

The twins had continued making use of their corner of the training room itself, working one or two nights of the week on various projects. It wasn't uncommon to hear small explosions or to see oddly-colored smoke pouring out from under the door. And every so often, it sounded like one of the two would get sick. Harry tried to ignore them as best he could, as he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know what they were trying to create.

He did know, of course, that the two were starting to seriously think about starting a joke shop of their own once they left Hogwarts. They claimed to want to give Zonko a run for his money. Harry had no doubts that poor Zonko would indeed need to up his efforts if he wanted to compete against the twins. Fred and George weren't dumb - they had made more interesting items than Harry could recall. They seemed almost abnormally intelligent for Gryffindors and Harry would sometimes wonder why they hadn't been sorted into Ravenclaw instead.

The night before the Second Task was to take place, Harry lay in bed waiting for Tonks, who was off having a bath. He had studied almost everything he could think of to help in what he figured he had to do. He hadn't worked out a good way to stave off the coldness of the water, but Boris had provided him with a spell that sounded interesting in regards to being able to breathe and move about once submerged. Harry had a few backup ideas in case he either couldn't make the spell work or it didn't suit his needs, of course, but he still wanted to go with the taipan's idea. It just sounded... intriguing.

Tonks wandered in fifteen minutes later, already changed into her pajamas. "I'm gonna fall asleep in that thing one day."

"I'll never forgive you if you up and drown on me." Harry said.

Crawling in and stretching out next to Harry, Tonks stuck out her tongue. "I'd be more worried about someone having to bust in and rescue me."

"Don't want anyone to levitate you out of the tub, huh?" Harry asked, grinning.

"I'd be saved only to die of embarrassment." Tonks said, making a face.

"I'm going to wisely refrain from continuing down this path." Harry said, stretching out. "I'm just hoping I actually sleep well tonight."

"Yeah, me too." Tonks said. "I don't wanna be stuck under that freezing lake for any longer than I need to be!"

"I'm still hoping it will be something aside from what I figured. But I doubt it will be. I seem to have good senses in regards to guessing." Harry said.

"So I've noticed." Tonks said, slipping under the covers and yawning. "Doesn't hurt to be wrong every now and again though."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, I wouldn't mind being wrong a *lot*, actually. Every time I'm right, it seems like something *bad* happens. Anyway, it looks like you're going to fall asleep on me, so I guess I'll stop worrying out loud."

"You shouldn't worry at all." Murmured Tonks, whose eyes were now closed. "Get some sleep, Harry. Tomorrow's a big day."

Harry nodded slowly, watching as Tonks quickly drifted off to sleep. He smiled, reaching over and gently brushing the girl's hair away from her face. "No one better take you from me." He whispered. "Even if it is just for the Tournament."

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When Harry awoke the following morning, he could sense something wasn't right before he even opened his eyes. That wonderfully familiar warmth he had grown used to having next to him was absent.

"I effing hate being right all the time." He croaked, clearing his throat as he cracked open an eye.

Sure enough, Tonks wasn't next to him. Letting out an irritated sigh, Harry got out of bed and quickly changed into some jeans and a t-shirt. If anyone thought he was going to go swimming in his robes, they were crazy. Still grumbling when he stormed out of the bedroom, he stopped in briefly in the dining room to order up a couple slices of toast, which he ate on his way down to the lake.

A large dock had been erected lakeside, and the other Champions had already arrived.

"Last as usual." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he approached.

"Ah, Harry! Good to see you." Dumbledore said as Harry stepped onto the dock. "We've a good five minutes before the Second Task is to begin and I was just about to brief everyone on what they shall need to do."

"Retrieve someone who got tossed in the lake?" Harry asked.

"Ah, very good, Harry. Yes, indeed, that is what your Second Task shall be." Dumbledore said as he turned to face the other three Champions. "You will need to dive down to the city deep within this lake where the resident merpeople live. There, you will find your targets. You must free the one who corresponds to you and return with him or her within the time limit."

Harry blew out a sigh as he stared down into the water. "I think I'd rather fight the Horntail again than jump in that."

Cedric patted him on the shoulder as he approached. "I think I'd be willing to sign that petition. What temperature do you reckon the water is?"

"Just warm enough that it hasn't frozen over." Harry gauged. "If any of us escape this without getting sick somehow, it'll be a miracle."

"At least the Third Task won't be until near the end of term. We'll have plenty of time to recover." Cedric said.

"Yes, well, you'll excuse me if that doesn't set my mind at ease." Harry said, scowling.

Leaning in, Cedric whispered, "It's just as well that Cho isn't here. It's hard not to stare at the veela girl in that swimsuit."

Harry snorted. "I'm glad that girl finally stopped fawning after me. It was entirely creepy. No offense, of course. As for Fleur... I already have a girlfriend. That and veelas just don't seem to have an effect on me."

"Lucky you. I've gotten slapped three times this year for accidentally falling victim to that girl's charm." Cedric said, rubbing at his cheek.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Cho only slaps, huh? Tonks leave bruises."

"Ouch."

"Yup. But I wouldn't trade it for the world. Bit angry they just decided to lob the people we care about into the freezing cold lake. There had better be some serious charms on them to keep them out, warm, and breathing." Harry muttered.

"Ah, I doubt there's any serious risk. We do have an hour to get them back, after all. And they've already been down there awhile, I'd guess." Cedric said, peering into the waters.

"Oh, I'm sure there isn't. Not going to stop me from being annoyed with the whole ordeal, though." Harry said.

When it was time for the Task to begin, Dumbledore gathered the four Champions up and began to explain. "You will each start at the same time. You will line up at the edge of the dock and when the signal is given, you may begin. The things you face on your trip include overcoming the cold, facing what lurks in the lake, and, of course, returning within the hour time limit. Points will be awarded for speed and ingenuity in overcoming your obstacles. Now then, line up!"

The Champions did as they were told, with Harry and Cedric finally kicking off their shoes and removing their shirts. Neither of them were as foolish as Fleur or Krum were. Those two had apparently arrived ready to begin swimming and had had to stand around in the chilly morning air.

"Nothing like giving the peanut gallery something to stare at, eh?" Harry muttered. He could hear a flock of girls screaming from somewhere in the stands.

"Just as well you aren't facing them. You're red as a beet." Cedric remarked.

"Oh, stuff a sock in it, Diggory." Harry mumbled.

The signal was the same as it had been in the First Task - a canon being fired. And when it did, the four all leapt in. Krum and Fleur immediately vanished under the surface, and Cedric was quick to follow.

Harry pulled his wand from his back pocket and, as he briefly broke the surface of the water again, aimed back at himself and whispered, "*Aquarius Spiritum!*"

He quickly dove back under the water and began to swim down. As he did, he started counting backwards from ten. Boris had told him the spell took a bit of time to take effect and that it might sting a bit once it took hold.

Clearly, Boris had been lying through his fangs. What Harry felt was not a 'sting' - it was full blown pain! He had to bite down on his lower lip to keep from opening his mouth in a scream that would just cause him to take in water. His lower body felt as if it had been stabbed by a thousand red-hot needles. He writhed around, his hands balled tightly into fists. And, after what felt like an eternity, when the pain finally subsided, Harry looked down.

'Ah,' He thought wearily, '*That's the reason.*'

He was not seeing his legs anymore. Rather, it appeared that his lower body had become something not unlike that of an octopus. A very red, hard-shelled octopus. He was sporting at least six tentacles now, each one looking like it could crush someone's head should it hit hard enough.

A sharp pain in the sides of his neck shortly after and the sudden ability to breathe again informed him that the spell seemed to include some gills.

He was going to have a severe talking to with that snake when he got back to land.

Strangely enough, Harry had no trouble getting accustomed to his new body. This spell, which Boris had told him was called the Curse of Dreugh, seemed to rewire Harry's brain into being capable of using

his newly-formed limbs with ease. A curse was right, Harry thought as he propelled himself through the water, wand still in hand.

The lake was far deeper than Harry ever imagined it could have been. A large hole opened up in what he figured was the bottom, leading further and further down. He was amazed that it wasn't getting much darker as he descended. The light filtering in through the hole certainly couldn't have illuminated the waters that much. It wasn't until Harry paused to look around that he noticed the glowing lanterns littering the aquatic landscape.

They were stuck in rocks and in the lakebed, hanging from up above and forced into rocky crags. It didn't seem natural at all to Harry. In fact, the further Harry descended, the more alien the landscape became. By the time he crested over a ridge and the city of the merpeople came into view, Harry had had to fight several tiny imp-like creatures that seemed to want nothing more than to take a bite out of his face. He had immediately forgiven Boris over the pain the spell had caused him, as his tentacles turned out to be good weapons in the water. He certainly wasn't using his wand to do much of anything. Maybe he just wasn't doing something right. Admittedly, he hadn't ever *needed* to use his wand underwater before. Perhaps there was a trick to it he wasn't aware of.

'To Y'ha-nthlei I go,' Thought Harry as he shot forward and into the Cyclopean city of the merpeople. The center of town had a large statue of one of the merpeople in it and had an amazing number of lights surrounding it, which made everything else look strangely eerie.

Mermen started to swim up and around him, clutching tridents and making threatening gestures towards him. But with a threatening display of his own, swinging his tentacles around wildly, they backed off slightly. They still followed him down to the tail of the giant statue, where the four targets were tied up.

Harry was surprised to be the first to arrive. He was even more surprised to see Hermione tied up on the long tail of the statue. She was at the far end of the thing. Gabrielle Delacour and Cho Chang were in the center. And, closest to him, was Tonks. The four appeared to be sleeping quite soundly, despite the situation they

were in. Harry was pleased to see that they all seemed to be breathing properly, as bubbles would come from their mouths every so often.

Harry quickly swam down and chopped the ropes binding Tonks to the statue. He scooped her up and smiled. She seemed quite peaceful, which made Harry a bit less angry over the fact that she had been used as bait. Behind him, he heard the merpeople making some kind of ruckus.

Whirling around, he saw an odd sight. Krum looked like he had sliced off the face of a very inbred shark and was using it as a breathing apparatus. Harry knew what the spell was, but was baffled by how badly Krum seemed to have performed it. Swimming just behind him was Cedric, who looked to have a giant bubble over his head. The strange thing was, the two kept spinning to face one another, shooting blasts from their wands. Blasts that did little more than fire a cloud of bubbles out.

When they got within range, they cut their targets loose and started to ascend, Cedric giving Harry an odd look as he swam off with Cho. Harry watched them go, wondering briefly why he hadn't started back himself. Glancing back to the statue and the sleeping form of Gabrielle Delacour, he started searching the waters, hoping to see Fleur.

But Fleur never came. Knowing the time limit was probably running low, Harry scowled. Something must have happened to the girl. Cursing himself out mentally, Harry turned and swam towards Gabrielle. The mermen surrounding the statue aimed their tridents at Harry as he drew closer. But the look in his eyes and the thrashing of his tentacles once more seemed to make them back off.

He knew Gabrielle was in no danger, but it didn't mean she should have to stay in the bloody frozen lake for any longer than necessary. As Harry whipped a tentacle down through the ropes holding her up, he smirked. She had warned him of the dragon and now he was returning the favor.

Carefully holding onto each girl, Harry let loose a burst of speed and began heading for the lake's surface again. The Tournament and the

points be damned. It wasn't right to just leave the girl there. As he headed back over the ridge in the rocks he had passed over earlier, he gave one final glance back at the city before pushing upward again. After all, when would he ever get a chance to return to look around?

Harry could feel the light before he saw it. The light coming through the hole in the lakebed was warming up the entire area. And though it wasn't much, it felt as though someone had draped a blanket over his shoulders.

He broke the surface of the water barely a minute later. When he did, it was to quickly get the two girls to shore. His gills and tentacles were still there, after all. He wasn't fit to breath or walk on land. Thankfully, there were a few spots where the shoreline simply dropped down. He had to detour slightly, but it was much less a hassle than if he chose to simply try maneuvering up the sandy portion.

It was nearly twenty minutes later that his lower body once more cried out in pain. Harry was also thankful that his pants hadn't ended up shredded by the transformation. The last thing he wanted was to end up naked in a freezing lake. They were, however, in rather poor condition, almost as if he had been caught in a shipwreck and they had been ripped by splintered wood.

When his gills vanished, he tiredly trudged from the chilly waters, his teeth chattering. "Must get to a fire." He muttered.

When he was back onto land properly, he turned around and allowed himself to flop down onto the ground. He stretched out on his back and groaned. He hadn't noticed while underwater, but that had completely worn him out. All he wanted was a mug of hot chocolate and a fire to fall asleep in front of.

"I oughta swat you." Came Tonks' irritated voice.

Tilting his head back, Harry smiled. Her clothes were dry and she had a large towel around her shoulders. "Yeah, I know. But it didn't feel right and I owed her one."

Rolling her eyes, Tonks walked over and offered a hand to Harry, who took it and got back to his feet. "Come on, you great soaked lump." She said. "Madam Pomfrey's off this way."

Harry allowed himself to be tugged along and happily let the mediwitch dry his clothes, fix his tattered jeans up, and give him a potion to warm him up. He was feeling much better when he was allowed to leave the tent.

"So what was the final score?" Harry asked.

"Well, Fleur came back up first. She had this really nasty cut on her right arm. So she was disqualified. Krum and Cedric almost arrived back at the same time. But Cedric got more points due to Krum's spell looking like rubbish. *You* came in well past the time limit, so you got disqualified too. But Dumbledore did commend you for not wanting to leave the little girl behind."

"And for that, I thank you." Came a tired-sounding, thick-accented voice from behind them.

Turning, Harry and Tonks saw Fleur and her little sister approaching. A large bandage was wrapped around most of the elder Delacour's right arm and she seemed to have a nasty bruise around her left eye.

"You don't look so hot. What happened?" Asked Harry.

"I was attacked." Fleur said simply. "The blood attracted more of the filthy little vermin. I was starting to feel lightheaded. ...Thank you for bringing Gabrielle back to me."

Harry nodded. "I was wondering. I saw Krum and Cedric get there and waited for you to show, but..."

"You got there **first**?" Tonks asked, her voice high-pitched. "Oh, I'm really gonna swat you later!"

Harry chuckled. "Hey, like I said - I owed her one."

Fleur frowned, glancing down at Gabrielle, who was making a face and looking off. Looking back up at Harry, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"She warned me about the dragons." Harry replied truthfully. "I warned Cedric. Figured it was only fair."

"I see." Said Fleur. But she sighed and gave her little sister a tight hug, which caused Gabrielle to blink in surprise. "I shall have a talk with Gabrielle about that. I thank you again, Harry Potter. Perhaps I was wrong to call you a little boy the night we were named Champions."

Harry just smiled. "Maybe you should keep better track of her from now on."

"Yes. I think I shall." Fleur said. "I believe... I have not acted as I should have this year."

Harry glanced over at the dock and the stands. No one had lingered around. No surprise - breakfast had been called off that day due to the early start of the Task. Looking back at the Delacour sisters, Harry said, "I think I'm going to go get some food. And, I think, I'm going to sit in front of a fire until I can give myself a reason not to hate water again."

The two groups parted ways then. Before passing through the double front doors of the school, Harry looked back over his shoulder. Fleur was kneeling in front of Gabrielle. A moment later, and the younger of the two threw her arms around her sister. Harry smiled. "One problem solved." He whispered. Then, louder, "Let's head back to the Pit. Got a long nap planned."

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"Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You still cold?"

"Yeah."

"Wanna go to bed?"

"I'm fine here."

"Your neck's gonna hate you."

"My neck can bugger off."

Tonks snorted. "You'd outclass Nearly-Headless Nick."

"Oh, be quiet."

"Aye aye, sir!" Tonks said, saluting Harry. Which might not have looked quite as ridiculous had she not been laying down on the couch with her head resting on Harry's leg.

"I'm comfy, you're comfy, let's just sleep like this." Harry said, smiling.
"I don't wanna leave the warmth of the fireplace behind."

"Oh, the jokes that could be made." Tonks said.

"Quiet, you. So how'd they get you, anyway?" Harry asked. "It's been bugging me since this morning."

"As no one could find us, Dumbledore tapped Leon to come and get me. And, no offense, but when you're having a good night's sleep? You're harder than I am to wake." Tonks said.

"Dumbledore probably knows where the Pit is, y'know. The man just seems to know things. Maybe Levi reports in to him or something." Harry pondered aloud.

"As long as he doesn't start dropping by for tea, I'll be fine with him knowing that the Pit exists." Tonks said. "Okay, seriously though - are you sure you're fine sleeping out here like this?"

"Perfectly fine. Now stop asking! After the day I've had, I'd be able to sleep standing up if it came down to it." Harry said.

"Well... alright. But if you wake up and your neck's hurting, wake me up and we'll move to the bedroom." Tonks said, poking Harry in the chest.

"Yes, ma'am." Harry replied, rolling his eyes.

Tonks closed her eyes, smiling. "I love this couch. When we graduate, we're shrinking this thing down and taking it to our apartment. Oh! And the bed, too. You think we'd be able to move the tub? It'd be a shame leaving it behind. Maybe you'll have some followers by our seventh year and you can pick one to inherit the Pit..."

Harry groaned. "Let's not talk about the possibility of me having *followers*. But yes, I do like this couch."

"Hey, Harry?"

"Hm?"

"Thanks."

"Thanks? For what?"

"Gettin' me out of the lake. And for being so sweet. You may be a complete blockhead at times, but it was nice of you to bring that Gabrielle kid out too."

"Yes, well, you know me. I have a saving people thing." Harry said.

"One left. And thank Merlin, because I dunno if I can take much more. When's the last Task scheduled for?" Asked Tonks.

"Mid-April." Harry said. "No clues as to what it'll be."

"At least you've got a bit of time to relax."

"Relaxing is good." Harry purred, tilting his head back onto the couch. "Relaxing plus heat equals good."

Tonks giggled.

"Think my brain's telling me it refuses to keep my eyes open anymore."

"I'm amazed you've lasted this long. Get some sleep."

"Good idea. Night, Nymmy."

"Night, Harry. Sweet dreams."

Chapter 19 – The Unexpected

Harry sighed.

He sighed and then he sniffled.

"Stupid cold." He muttered under his breath.

It had taken a whole night's sleep for it to sink in, but sink in it had. Harry Potter was being bested by the common cold.

"You know, Boris..." Harry began. "I think you left out a few key things about the Curse of Dreugh spell you suggested to me."

"Oh?" Replied the snake, who was stretched out on one of the couch's arms. "*And what might that be?*"

"The fact that it didn't *sting*. It hurt like hell, you bloody serpent! Felt like I was being split apart!" Harry growled.

"*Technically, you were.*" Said the taipan in a very dry tone.

"Then you knew! So why didn't you tell me?!"

"*Would you have used a spell that would hurt or would you have searched for a simpler, less painful alternative that probably wouldn't have worked as well?*" Asked Boris, turning his head to stare up at Harry. Harry didn't reply.

"*I thought so.*"

"Oh, shut up." Harry said. "You know, you've been acting strangely ever since we got here."

"*Have I? I assure you I hadn't noticed.*" Said the snake.

"I'll bet. I think I've just about whittled down to *why* you've been in a mood so often as of late, too." Harry stated.

"*And why might that be?*"

"You're worried I'll turn into someone like your old master. You think that no matter what I do, I'll end up 'Dark,' don't you?"

"Few could be as Dark as he was." Said the snake.

"I have no doubt that necromancers are indeed Dark in *some* sense of the word. But what makes you think I'd ever *want* to dabble in that kind of thing? I have no intention of bringing the dead back to life. If you could even call being an Inferus *LIFE*." Harry said.

*"Master Whitechapel was different. Men like him never **plan** to be what they are. He fell early into his life. And it got worse the longer he lived. When the Australian Aurors got to him, he had amassed a small army of the undead, amongst other things. I assure you, I'll turn on you should you try turning me into anything abnormal!"*

Harry raised his eyebrows. Boris was practically snarling by the time he finished. He had never seen the taipan speak like that before. "Abnormal? ...What did he do to you, Boris?"

"Have you ever seen a picture of a hydra? Do you know what kind of power they possess? Care to be told what one can do to a human?" Asked the snake, his voice quiet once more. *"My master transfigured me. He used some obscure branch of alchemy to twist me. He took control of my mind and forced me to slaughter and eat many men before he was struck with a blasting curse to the back of the head. When he died, the spells over me were lifted."*

"By the end, my master's forces were wiped out. Sadly, most of the Aurors were, as well. I was petrified when they saw that I was still alive. I remember little after that. I know I was placed in a small box. How I managed to not lose my mind was probably simply because of how I had lived. After spending a lifetime seeing a man perform insane experiments on all manner of men and beasts, be they living or dead, seemed to desensitize me. I had learned to disconnect my mind from my body, so to speak, to block out any outside noises."

"When the spell on me was lifted, I was looking into the face of the man you call Hagrid. I have no idea how he came to find me, or even how and when I left Australia. Perhaps you should ask him if you wish to find out."

Harry listened to the little snake speak. It was very rare for him to speak of his past. To let it out like this, Harry felt that it must have been driving him crazy. "Feel better?" He asked.

"...*I do.*" Said the snake.

"As I've been told, it isn't good to bottle emotions up. I can't imagine what you've witnessed over the years, Boris. But I can promise you that I will never go Dark like your master did. I have no desire to harm anyone unless they have brought harm to someone I love. I've spent the better part of my life being abused, Boris. If the Dursleys couldn't make me go Dark, little else could." Harry said.

"Perhaps. We shall see. My master once claimed things similar to you. That he would never become Dark. That he would be able to find a way to bring back the dead without falling. But when one starts to defy those kinds of unwritten laws, one passes the point where one can save themselves." Boris said.

The two sat in silence for awhile, the only noises the crackling of the fire and the occasional snuffle from Harry. Finally, Harry looked back at Boris and said, "Did you realize you said part of his name? Whitechapel doesn't sound like a first name."

"I hadn't meant to let his name slip. For my master wrote many books. And it would not be terribly difficult to find his works if one were to search in the right locations. I can only hope you never do so." Boris said.

"You assume I could find books by him with only part of his name." Harry said.

"Whitechapel is not a very common name, I would assume." Said Boris.

"It isn't. You might as well tell me his first name, then. No point in hiding it if his last will get a person anything they might want to know about him." Harry said.

A sigh, and then, *"Jaeger."*

Harry nearly fell over. "JAEGER?" He repeated, incredulous. "Jaeger Whitechapel?!"

"Jaeger Whitechapel." Echoed the snake with a bob of his head. *"Now, may we please change the subject? Hearing his name spoken sends chills through my body. Please, Harry - please do not try and seek out any of the books he wrote. That is all I ask."*

"I won't. I promise." Harry said, recovering quickly. "Thanks for telling me about him, though."

"I hadn't meant to. But hearing you speak like you did dredged up unwanted memories."

"I'm sorry for that, then." Said Harry, frowning.

"You had no way of knowing." Replied Boris.

"Are you talking to that snake?"

Harry toppled forward and off the couch, landing on the rug in front of it with a **THUD**. Rolling onto his back, he turned and stared at the couch. Or rather, at who was standing behind it.

Gabrielle Delacour, looking thoroughly confused, was looking between Harry and Boris. "Are you alright?"

"How... how did you get in here?" Harry squeaked, getting to his feet.

"That girl you saved told me how to get here." Gabrielle said. "Should I not be here?"

"I... girl I saved? You mean Ginny or Tonks? I've technically saved both of them. ...And if you want to get really technical, I've saved Hermione, too." Harry said.

"Tonks." Gabrielle said with a nod. "I did not get a chance to thank you for saving me, too."

Harry smiled crookedly as he walked around the couch. "Well, like I said - I owed you. You told me about the dragons, after all. How are things with your sister?"

"Fleur has acted much differently." Gabrielle said, her eyes lighting up. "She pays a lot more attention to me than she did before the Second Task."

"Well, that's good." Harry said. The young girl returned his smile for a moment before her expression turned to a glare and she slugged him in the stomach.

"And that is for the two hour long 'talk' I got from her last night!" Huffed Gabrielle.

Harry, wincing only slightly (the girl really didn't have much power behind her punch, shrugged. "Sorry. But it helped in the long run, yeah?"

Once more the smile returned to the young girl's face. "I suppose so. This is a very strange place, Harry."

"Oi, this isn't strange. This is sanctuary." Said Harry. "Me and my friends come here to spend our free time. We've determined that too much crazy stuff happens in the rest of the place. We needed a place to get away to. Did Tonks make you promise not to tell anyone else the password or where it's located?"

Gabrielle nodded. "She did. And I do promise."

"Good, good. Wouldn't do if the secret got out. ...Tell you what. As a way of apologizing for the dressing down your sister gave you, you can come here whenever you want for as long as Beauxbatons remains at Hogwarts. You might get bored, though." Harry said. "We've got stuff to read. Just don't get anything from the upper three shelves on either bookcase, okay? It's Dark Arts related."

"Really? You would let me come down here?" Asked the girl.

"Sure. Like I said, there really isn't a whole lot to do. There's the books, the fireplace, the training room, and the bath. And you don't

look old enough to have gotten a wand yet..." Harry said. "Oh, and the dining room, though I dunno if you'd be able to summon anything to eat without a wand."

Gabrielle just tilted her head. "I think that if I came to visit, I would read. It would help my English."

"Your English is already very good." Harry assured her.

"So you did not answer my question - were you talking to that snake?" Asked Gabrielle, peering around Harry.

"I was." Harry said.

"But is that not something only Dark wizards can do?" Asked the girl. "That is what people always say."

"I'll let you in on a secret about most people." Harry said, kneeling down. "Most people are full of it. Magic isn't that easily classified. And besides, Boris here is a good conversationalist. Even if he *is* a bit snarky sometimes."

"*Oh, go jump in the lake.*" Hissed Boris lazily.

"I've *already* jumped in the lake, thank you." Harry said, turning to glare at the taipan.

"*Then go jump BACK in it.*"

"How about I fling *YOU* into it?"

"*You try and I'll bite you so hard they'll never get me loose.*"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"*Try me.*"

Harry glared, but gave up on the argument. When he looked back at Gabrielle, it was to find the girl holding a hand over her mouth to hide her quiet giggling.

"And what, might I ask, are *you* laughing at?" Asked Harry.

"The snake just told you to jump in the lake?"

"Yeah, he did. Twice, in fact." Harry said, scowling.

"It sounded like you lost the fight."

"I did not!" Harry argued.

"*Yes, you did. The girl is very bright, Harry. You should listen to her.*" Boris said.

"Yarr, I'm being teamed up on! Boris, you go to sleep! Gabrielle, you go and hunt down your sister! Spend some time with her now that you've got a chance." Harry said, standing back up.

"You just want me out of your hair so you can fight with the snake some more, don't you?" Said the girl with a grin on her face.

Harry chased her out of the Pit, Gabrielle laughing the whole way.

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Almost a week later, something completely unexpected happened. Harry was sitting in front of the fireplace in the Pit, reading through his 4th-year Charms book when the flames shot up twice as high as they usually did. Even being as engrossed in the book as he was, the motion caught him offguard.

"What the hell?" He wondered aloud as the flames lowered to their normal size. But a moment later, the fire took the shape of a man's head.

"Ah, Harry. I was hoping I could still connect. It has been quite a long time since any of us have ever needed to *contact* that particular room."

"...How long have you known?"

The face of Dumbledore smiled. "Quite some time, I'm afraid. Don't worry, I do not have any qualms with you and your friends using the chambers. Nor will I make a habit of calling you like this. It's just that I

have two people here who are very interested in seeing you. I can link our fireplaces together if you'd like."

"Sure, feel free. But who could possibly be there to see *ME*?" Harry asked, setting his book down next to him.

"Just a pair of old friends." Came a familiar, tired-sounding voice.

Harry's eyes immediately lit up. "Professor Lupin? Then, does that mean...?"

"What, you think I let him go out alone?" Came another unmistakable voice. "He's got the worst directional sense of anyone I know!"

"Padfoot..."

"Well it's true!"

The face of Dumbledore, which had briefly disappeared, popped back up. "Everything is set. Prepare, as they say, to be boarded."

Harry snorted as first Remus Lupin then Sirius Black came tumbling out of the Pit's fireplace. The former landed as gracefully as he could, given that the fireplace wasn't that tall. Sirius landed on his backside.

"I may get lost, Sirius," Said Lupin, extending a hand out to the long-haired man, who scowled and took it. "But at least I don't fall all over the place."

Sirius dusted himself off. "Yeah, yeah. I'll remember that next time I decide to let *you* guide us somewhere." And then, turning to Harry, he broke out in a grin. "Good to see you still in one piece!"

"We got your letters. We've... ah... been on assignment, shall we say, and only recently have been able to return to the area." Lupin explained.

"Which reminds me..." Sirius began, rummaging through the inner pockets of his robe. "I'm sorry I couldn't mail it to you, but we were out in the middle of nowhere for awhile. Ah, here it is."

Sirius produced a small, gift-wrapped box and held it out to Harry, whose eyes lit up even further. "You managed to get it!" He cried, taking the box from his godfather. "Was it difficult to have done?"

"I had to hunt around quite a bit, yes." Lupin said, smiling. "I was shocked when Sirius related your second letter to me. I thought he was making it up at first. That tiny thing cost more than most houses."

"It's worth it." Harry said. "Though I can't imagine mum and dad being too happy that I spent such a large amount of money."

Sirius snorted.

"Clearly, we need to tell you more about Lily and James." Lupin said.

Harry quickly pocketed the tiny box. "So how come you two stopped in? Isn't it dangerous?"

"Nah. Remus can move around in society well enough when it isn't near the full moon. He's the one who did all the hunting for your gift there, by the way. When we arrived back in Hogsmeade, he sent an owl to Albus, who sent his phoenix to come pick us up." Sirius said.

"How long's this visit to be?" Harry asked. "I wouldn't say no to housing a few guests for awhile."

"I'm afraid it's just for the afternoon. We're back mostly to report to Albus on our mission. But, as we'd only recently been able to procure your gift, we thought we'd stop by to deliver it in person." Said Lupin.

"On that note - where the hell are we?" Sirius asked.

"You are in the private chambers once used by Dilys Derwent herself.." Answered the head of Dumbledore, which was still in the fireplace. "A Slytherin, before you ask, and one of the brightest women ever to grace the head position at Hogwarts."

"So this belonged to one of the headmistresses? Cool." Harry said. "Well, you can tell her portrait that we're taking good care of her quarters, then."

"Duly noted. Now then, Remus, Sirius? I'm expecting a visit from Cornelius around six tonight. I will send Fawkes down to you half an hour in advance so you can return to the Shrieking Shack and depart from there." Dumbledore said, turning to face the two Marauders. And with that, the elderly man's face vanished and the fire resumed being just that.

"Um... well, I wasn't exactly expecting company today. This might pose a problem." Harry said. "More people than just Tonks, Leon, and I use this place as a sanctuary away from the rest of the school. I've only told a few other friends about it. They're all trustworthy, but..."

"But?" Lupin asked.

"Well, Pansy Parkinson is kind of in that group." Harry said, making a face. "And she's been a bit... uh... emotional, shall we say, in the last few months."

"Ah yes. Miss Parkinson. She never seemed to do anything too remarkable, if memory serves..." Lupin said. "Well, it's up to you, Harry."

"Well, I could always change the password to the door, but if someone else wanted to stop in and couldn't get in, I think they might begin to wonder." Harry said, scowling now.

"You said they were all trustworthy, right?" Sirius asked, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. When he nodded, Sirius continued, "Well, what's the problem, then? I can be in dog form in an instant if I need to be. And I daresay Remus could tell when someone's approaching anyway. Relax, kid."

"You're right, I guess. Sorry. It's been kind of a strange year." Harry said.

"So it would seem." Lupin said. "How have you been holding up?"

"As best as can be expected." Harry said. Then, glancing at the fireplace briefly, as though to make sure Dumbledore wasn't listening

in still, he went on. "I think Professor Moody is the who did it. Put my name in the Goblet, I mean."

Sirius and Lupin exchanged a confused look.

"Alastor Moody?" Asked Sirius. "Nah, couldn't be. He's crazier than a pack of frenzied centaurs, but you can trust him. Just don't piss him off."

"Is there anything that made you come to this conclusion, Harry?" Asked Lupin.

Sitting back down, Harry shrugged. "I suppose it could have been one of the visiting schools' heads, but I dunno how likely that is. Not that Karkaroff gives off good vibes or anything."

"Karkaroff? **IGOR** Karkaroff?" Asked Sirius, brow creased.

"I think so. Why? You know him?"

"Know him? He was a Death Eater! I've *FOUGHT* him!" Sirius said.

"What? When?" Asked Harry.

"A few months before... well, before Voldemort went after your parents. Bastard had a mouth on him. Wouldn't surprise me if he avoided a sentence in Azkaban. I woulda smelled him as I escaped if he hadn't. How the hell did he become head of a school?!" Sirius said.

"Perhaps he was spared much as Severus was." Lupin said.

"Snivellus can go jump in a cauldron too." Sirius muttered darkly, causing Harry to laugh.

"Now now, Sirius..." Lupin began. But suddenly, his head jerked around. "...Someone's coming. Sirius, if you would?"

"Damn, already?" Sirius asked. Taking a deep breath, he took the form of a large, black dog, which was hidden quite well so long as he stood directly in front of the couch.

When the door opened, Tonks, Solieyu, and Hermione entered. The girls seemed to be coming off the end of a massive laughing fit, judging by how they looked. Solieyu, on the other hand, looked about as disgruntled as he ever had, a faint blush lighting up his face.

"Oh man, I wish I had had a camera." Tonks chuckled. "Where on earth did she *get* that hat?"

"Not funny." Solieyu muttered.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, but it really was." Hermione said.

Then, all at the same time, the three seemed to notice that Harry wasn't alone. The girls' eyes lit up at the sight of their old Defense Professor.

"What are you doing here, Professor?" Asked Hermione as the group walked over.

"I'm not your professor anymore." Lupin pointed out, smiling. "And we - Sirius, you can change back, you know - were stopping by to report in on a mission. We had something to give to Harry, as well."

Sirius was sitting cross-legged on the floor when he changed back, grinning up at the group. "Hey."

"Sirius!" Tonks cried, running over to give the man a hug. "Wow, you look much better than the last time we saw you."

"Yes, well, a good shave and some clean clothes will do that to a man, I suppose." Sirius said, chuckling. "How're you and Andromeda doing?"

"Bout as well as ever. Spending our time arguing, worrying about Harry. The usual." Tonks said.

"Oi oi..." Harry mumbled. Then, clearing his throat, he asked, "Are either of you hungry? These fine quarters come with a dining hall."

"I'm starving. Let's eat!" Sirius said, hopping to his feet. "We haven't been able to get a whole lot of quality eating done."

Harry led the group into the dining room. "Oh? So what *have* you two been upto?"

"Can't tell you, I'm afraid." Said Lupin. "Nothing dangerous, I assure you. We were never in a situation where Sirius might be seen."

After Harry had sat the group down and everyone had ordered (with Sirius piling up), he turned to Solieyu and asked, "So what were those two laughing about?"

"Don't ask, Harry." Solieyu said, making a face as he stared at his goblet.

"Luna made him a very interesting hat." Hermione said, fighting the grin that was threatening to spread across her face. "Have you ever seen Neville's gran?"

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice. "Oh no, she *didn't*..."

"Oh, it wasn't quite *that* bad." Tonks said. "But it was just as tall."

"I'm not fond of *any* of you." Solieyu grumbled, sliding down in his chair.

The meal passed by at a comfortable pace. Sirius went back for seconds and even thirds before leaning back in his chair and groaning. The group stayed in the dining room, as it had the most readily-available seating, and talked about random things for awhile. Sirius wanted to know everything that had happened to Harry in regards to the Triwizard Tournament, while Lupin was more interested in how everyone's grades were doing. And in return, Harry had asked about what Sirius and Lupin had been upto before getting their secretive mission.

"Mostly catching up on lost time." Lupin stated. "We met up at my cottage after your third year had ended. I'm sure you'd find it all quite boring to hear about, really. We talked about who was working where, what had changed since Sirius had been sent to Azkaban, things like that."

"You lot want to know why Remus' robes are always patchwork?" Sirius asked in a stage whisper. "Because he spent all his money on his *BED*."

"Sirius." Lupin said in a warning tone.

"What?" Asked Sirius, grinning aside at the werewolf. "It's true! That bed was ridiculous, Moony! Comfortable as hell, but utterly ridiculous!"

"A man needs a good night's sleep." Was all Lupin would say on the matter.

"You should see ours." Harry said, smirking.

"'Ours'?" Repeated Lupin, eyebrow raised.

Tonks blushed and lowered her head while Harry just smiled. "Ours." He said again. "Don't worry. We sleep and that's it."

"You know, I'd like to ask where the fun in that is, but I'm related to our dear little Nymphadora here, so..." Sirius trailed off.

"Don't call me Nymphadora!" Tonks barked.

"Come on, then." Harry said, getting to his feet. "Follow me in. I'm curious now. I want to see if we have the more ludicrous bed or whether Professor Lupin does."

"Not your professor anymore." Lupin said again.

"Well, what should we call you, then?" Asked Harry. "'Mr. Lupin' doesn't sound right. No offense."

"None taken."

"But Remus sounds *too* informal."

Lupin shrugged. "Then call me Moony."

"You sure?" Asked Harry.

"Positive."

"Moony it is then." Harry said, nodding. "Well then, Moony - how about it?"

Harry had led the group out of the dining room and back through the main, throwing open the bedroom door when he reached it. Sirius took one look inside and immediately cracked up.

"Oi! What're you cackling at, you bloody harpie?" Asked Tonks.

"A fine bed indeed." Lupin said, head raised.

"Very comfortable." Harry and Tonks said in unison. They then exchanged a surprised look with one another, blushed, and looked off in different directions.

Sirius dissolved into laughter again.

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"It's going to be time to leave soon." Lupin noted some hours later.

The group had moved back into the main room, crowding around the couch and fireplace and spending the rest of the afternoon talking and sharing stories.

"Yeah, we're gonna be shipped back out on another job tonight. So are you gonna give it to her while we're here or what?" Asked Sirius, looking at Harry.

"Give what to who?" Asked Tonks.

"I think now would be as good a time as any." Harry said, fishing in his robes for the tiny box. "Nymmy, I wrote to Sirius again not long before Christmas, asking if they could help me hunt something down. I hadn't the slightest idea of where to find what I was after. I figured Sirius would ask Moony if he wasn't sure either. Through some stroke of Fate, they managed to get ahold of it."

"So... what, am I getting another Christmas gift?" Tonks asked.

"A bit late, I'm afraid." Lupin said. "But yes. You could call it that."

Harry nodded. "Exactly. Moony, you sure it was made just as I wanted?"

"Perfectly, Harry. Both of us inspected it. For what it cost, we made sure you didn't get screwed over." Said Sirius.

"'For what it cost'?" Tonks echoed. "Harry, what did you *get* me?"

"Something fitting." Harry said, handing the box to Tonks.

The girl quickly tore off the wrapping paper and opened the fuzzy-feeling box. She let out a quiet 'oooh' when she saw what it held. "Harry, what *is* this?"

"It's called ammolite." Harry said. "I came across some pictures of the stuff and it made me think of you."

"Unfortunately for Harry, it's quite rare and also quite expensive." Said Lupin.

"Ooh, what is it?" Asked Hermione, moving from her place at the far end of the couch to get a better look.

It was a ring, as it turned out. The ammolite gemstone was embedded in the center of a highly detailed Ouroboros outline that was accented with diamonds. The gemstone itself had several clear, hard caps over it to keep it safe.

"Oh, it's gorgeous!" Hermione cooed as she finally got a good look.

"It really is... how the heck much did this *cost*?" Asked Tonks, who was still staring at the ring.

"Somewhere in the realm of fifteen thousand Galleons." Sirius said, as though it were commonplace to discuss ridiculously-priced objects.

Tonks nearly toppled over. "Fifteen **THOUSAND**?"

"That's... good lord, Harry." Solieyu said, trying to calculate what that equated to in Muggle money.

Harry just smiled. "Look, I have far too much money in that vault. My *grandchildren* will have entirely too much in it. I wanted to get something special."

"Grandchildren, huh?" Tonks said, grinning over at Harry, who blinked a few times before realizing what he had just said and blushing.

"Figure of speech." He mumbled quietly. Then, louder, he continued, "Anyway, don't worry about the cost. As long as you like it, that's enough for me. You *DO* like it, don't you?"

"I love it!" Tonks exclaimed, slipping it onto a her left hand's ring finger.

Harry just smiled, watching as the girl held her hand out to gaze at the ring again.

Solieyu leaned in and whispered almost inaudibly, "You know what she just did, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Was it intended?"

Harry nodded again.

Solieyu chuckled softly. "Moving a bit fast, aren't you?"

Harry tilted his head back to whisper in reply, "I'll never love someone as much as I love her. So why not?"

Solieyu just nodded, standing back up straight again.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light from somewhere behind the couch. Harry had spun around, his wand out, ready to dodge any wild attacks that might come. But it was only Fawkes, who was flapping in place and giving Harry an odd look.

"Sorry." Harry said, putting his wand away. "I'm getting jumpy these days."

"I guess that means it's time to go, Padfoot." Said Lupin.

Sirius sighed. "Yeah, I guess so. Well, at least we got to have a fun half-day off."

"Couldn't think of a way I'd rather have spent it." Agreed Lupin.

The Marauders walked around the couch as the teens got to their feet. Harry and Sirius looked at one another for a moment before smiling and embracing tightly.

"It was good seeing you again." Sirius murmured.

"You too." Harry replied softly. "Keep safe out there. Both of you." He added in a louder tone.

"We will, Harry." Said Lupin. "I'll keep an eye on Padfoot. He hasn't gotten into any trouble yet."

"Yet." Harry said, smirking at his long-haired godfather.

"Oh, shut up, brat." Sirius said, rolling his eyes. Then, grinning, he said, "Well, it's been nice seeing you lot again!"

"Feel free to stop in any time." Tonks said, standing near Harry.

"We may just do that." Lupin said. "Okay, Fawkes. Any time you're ready, I guess."

The phoenix trilled softly, a noise that seemed to give everyone present shivers. Lupin and Sirius held up their arms, which the phoenix grabbed ahold of with each claw. And, in another bright flash of light, the three were gone.

"I wish they didn't have to go." Harry said, shoulders slumping.

"They'll be alright. Lupin'll make sure Sirius doesn't do anything he shouldn't." Said Hermione. "Still feels strange not to call him 'Professor,' though."

"It does." Solieyu agreed. "...And it is almost dinnertime."

"I'm eating down here." Harry said. "I don't want anything ruining the nice day I seem to be having."

"Ditto." Said Tonks.

Solieyu and Hermione exchanged a quick glance before smiling at one another. The Gryffindor girl waved as she and Solieyu headed towards the door out of the Pit. "See you two later, then!"

"I'm sure Luna will spirit me off somewhere after dinner." Solieyu said.

"To make more hats, perhaps." Hermione offered.

Solieyu chased her out of the room.

When the door closed behind them, Tonks whirled around, grabbed Harry by the front of the robes, and kissed him with such force that he thought he was going to topple over backwards.

"Whoa..." He said, slightly dazed, as Tonks pulled away.

"I can't believe you spent so much money on me, Harry." Tonks said, holding up her hand and gazing at the ammolite ring again. "It's so beautiful, though..."

"It was worth every Galleon." Harry said. "I'm actually surprised Moony and Sirius got it for me, though. I figured I'd run into resistance."

"Yeah, I'd imagine so."

"It's custom designed, you know." Harry said.

"Yeah, I kinda figured. Ouroboros symbols aren't exactly common." Tonks said, grinning crookedly.

"Well, I needed something that would be fitting." Harry said.

"I think he has excellent taste in fashion design." Boris suddenly said.

Harry laughed, relating what the taipan had said.

"I agree with you wholeheartedly." Tonks said, grinning at the snake, who lowered his head and resumed being curled up on the fireplace.

"So... care to have dinner now? I'm sure I could get a couple of candles going somehow." Harry said.

"A ring *and* a candlelit dinner, huh? This seems to be my lucky day." Tonks said.

Putting a hand on his chest as they walked, Harry adopted a pompous voice and said, "*Every* day I spend in your presence I consider a lucky one, milady!"

Tonks rolled her eyes and swatted Harry's arm. Or, at least, she tried to. Harry was ready for this one. He caught her hand, brought it up, and gently kissed it. "I really do mean it, Nymmy. No matter how bad my life might seem, as long as you're still in it, I know everything will be okay."

Tonks blushed, tugging her hand back. "Where did you learn to be so sweet, anyway?"

"I've had a couple years to think up this stuff." Harry said. "It's just I actually get to say it now."

As she opened the door to the dining room, Tonks smiled at Harry. "Harry, you're a sweetheart, I love you, but really - never go into the card-writing business."

Harry nodded slowly. "Oh, I'll readily admit that the stuff I say is sappier than a load of pancakes. But I made *you* blush with it, so what's that say about you?"

"Apparently it says that I am, in fact, a pancake." Tonks said in a dry tone.

"Just one?"

"How many pancakes do you plan on having?"

Harry paused, the grinned like an idiot. "Okay, knowing the type of thing I *might* reply with, you still asked."

"...What were you gonna say?" Asked Tonks, looking warily at Harry.

"That, as you were the best pancake in the world, one was more than enough?" Offered Harry.

He promptly got smacked in the arm.

"You asked!" He cried as Tonks walked into the dining room.

"*And what have we learned today, class?*" Asked Boris, lazily.

"That too much syrup is hazardous to your health." Harry said with a sage nod. He then turned to join Tonks at the table.

"If we're having pancakes for dinner, you're getting smacked again."

Chapter 20 – Evergreen

"Please... please, help me... free me from this nightmare..."

The voice had become clear enough to be heard. It was that of an old man, his voice raspy, begging to me saved. But saved from what? Harry had no idea. The voice still came from the same slowly-spinning gemstone amidst a sea of black. It was the first time the man's pleading had been coherent. Previously, it was hazy and distant, as though from calling from far away.

Harry sighed as his eyes slid open. His arms instinctively slid around Tonks' body as he tried to stop his mind from overthinking things. His breathing became slower as he laid there and, eventually, he blew out another sigh.

The Third Task was to take place two days from now. The Champions would be finding out what it was that afternoon. Something wasn't right, though. Harry couldn't place his finger on what, but something just wasn't right. No matter how much thought he put into the matter, he couldn't come up with an answer. And being unable to answer something was something that irritated Harry Potter to no end.

In addition to the usual pre-Task worries, Professor Moody had been brought back into the forefront of Harry's mind once more. He seemed to be acting stranger than normal in classes. Harry would often watch the old man walking around the castle at night through the use of the Marauder's Map. A few times, he had tried getting into Snape's stockroom. Once he had even snooped outside the greasy-haired man's private quarters. In addition, he had walked all over Hogwarts at some point or another. It was unsettling to witness. Why the one-eyed old man set off Harry's alarms so badly was anyone's guess. He wasn't acting any more paranoid than the stories made him out to be.

Still... the puzzle was coming together and Harry was missing key pieces. And when he couldn't find the right piece to place in the right place, Harry didn't sleep well. Nor did he eat well or study well. He fell

into a state where he lost himself in some random object across the room, trying to work out what it all meant and how it all fit together.

Tonks knew this part of him well, having watched him develop his deep thinking process over the past three and a half years. If she entered the Pit to find him staring intently into the fire with his eyes unfocused, she knew he wouldn't be snapped out of it unless he decided to come out on his own.

One of the few bright moments of Harry's life had been seeing how Tonks had showed off her new ring to people in the weeks after Sirius and Lupin brought it. Only a few people seemed to really pick up on the significance of the gesture, it seemed. The twins had been halted for almost a full minute as they stared at the ammolite gem before turning to stare at *Harry* for awhile. Grins slowly broke out on their faces and they raised a small ruckus in the Pit. They had also warned Harry and Tonks not to let their mother ever see the ring or she'd have a fit. Harry tried asking *why* but neither of the twins would give an answer to his questions.

Speaking of the Pit, the sparse visits from Pansy Parkinson had once more abruptly come to a halt. She always appeared to be with a small crowd of friends, so Harry hadn't tried approaching her again to ask her what was going on. He tried to tell himself that she would tell him when she was ready, but even he was starting to wonder.

"Stop thinking so hard." Came Tonks' groggy voice.

"Damn. Sorry... I was trying not to move or make too much noise." Harry whispered.

Shifting slightly, Tonks mumbled, "S'alright. I just seem to have gained the ability to sense when you're bothered by something at night and wake up on my own."

"A very bad habit, that." Harry said, brushing his fingers through the girl's hair.

"Shuddup." Tonks whined, stretching briefly before curling back up against Harry, her right hand draping itself across his body. Her

fingers slipping under the edge of his shirt to curl around his left shoulder, she asked, "What woke you up this time?"

"That stupid spinning gem. I heard the voice this time." Harry said. "It was begging for help."

"Oh, well that's pleasant." Tonks said. "Any idea what it might be?"

"Dunno. I'm gonna try ignoring it, though. I've got other stuff to worry about." Harry replied.

"S'a good idea." Tonks said, yawning. "Mm... what time izzit?"

"About six."

"Wanna just go ahead an' get up?"

"You sure? I can come back in and wake you when it's time for classes."

"No fun without you serving as my pillow." Tonks said, giggling sleepily.

"Oh, that's what I've been reduced to, is it?" Asked Harry.

"Yes. Yes it is. You're a very comfy pillow." Tonks stated.

"You *sure* you want to get up?"

"Nope."

Harry laughed. "So why suggest it?"

"Urge for food is trying to overpower the urge to stay snuggled up to you." Tonks said in a pouty voice.

"I *could* always go get whatever you want to eat and bring it in here, you know." Harry pointed out.

"Ooh, breakfast in bed? That sounds lovely." Tonks said, slowly letting go of Harry and rolling onto her back. "I want--"

"Some ham and eggs, three strips of very crisp bacon, a few slices of bread to make a simple sandwich from them with, two slices of toast, and some orange juice." Harry said.

"...How long've you had that memorized?"

"Three months." Harry said, chuckling as he slipped out of bed. "I'm very observant."

"So it seems." Tonks said, sitting up and propping up the bed's pillows behind her. "You gonna be joining me in here?"

"Of course." Harry said.

"Chop chop then! My tummy needs to be filled!" Tonks said, grinning at Harry as he headed for the door.

Sticking his tongue out briefly, Harry waved. "I'll be back in a minute or two!"

"No pancakes!" Tonks called after him.

"No pancakes!" Harry repeated, laughing as he left the bedroom.

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"A bloody maze!" Harry yelled when he returned to the Pit later that day. "After fighting a dragon and going to what *had* to be the bottom of the lake, the Third is nothing but a *MAZE*!"

"You sound upset. I'd think you'd *want* something simple." Solieyu dryly noted from his position in the room's corner. Peering up at Harry over the corner of his book, he added, "There's probably a catch."

"Oh, I'm sure there is." Harry said, running a hand back through his hair. "Where's Nymmy at?"

"She had a bit too much to eat for lunch and is napping it off." Solieyu said, rolling his eyes.

"How the hell does one prepare for a maze?" Harry wondered aloud, sitting in the chair opposite Solieyu's. "It's a *maze*. You wander around it, get lost, and so forth!"

"You honestly think they aren't going to *put* things in it?"

"Oh, I'm sure they will, but I doubt it'll be anything too bad."

Solieyu chuckled darkly.

Harry shot him a look. "What was that?"

"What was what?" Asked the vampire.

"That laugh. What the hell are you chuckling about?" Asked Harry.

"You remember those things Tonks and I told you about? The ones that Hagrid's had us raising most of the year?"

"Yeah, what... Oh, damnation." Harry said, his head flopping forward into his awaiting hands at the thought. Slightly muffled, he muttered, "Hope they set the stupid maze on fire and kill themselves in the blaze."

"Oh, what are you so bitter about? *You* haven't had to raise them." Solieyu said, finally closing his book and setting it on his lap. "They *have* to be less hassle fully grown than when they were small."

"Be that as it may," Harry began, lifting his head and shaking it slowly. "Wonder what else might get lodged in the place. All I know is the Triwizard Cup is gonna be at the center and the first one there wins. Makes me ruddy wonder what the hell the other two Tasks were for."

"Amusement and probably little more."

"Probably."

The two sat in silence for awhile before Solieyu asked, "So has the headmaster popped in to say hi since Sirius and Lupin visited?"

"Nope. Thankfully. Though you know, every time I saw him after their visit, he seemed to be *beaming* at me." Harry said.

"Probably your little unspoken engagement." Solieyu pointed out.

"Wouldn't surprise me. I think he's glad that I'm not full of sour emotions and angst." Harry said. "That or he just wants to get a good spot at the wedding, whenever that would take place."

Solieyu chuckled quietly. "I still can't believe you did that, you know."

"I can't imagine myself being with anyone else. But it was really nice to see she felt the same way. She didn't have to put the ring on that particular finger." Harry said.

"Would you have been upset if she had?"

"A little, I think. But I would have just asked directly at some point after if it came to that, so it's no big deal." Harry said.

"Ahh. Well, I'm happy for the two of you, in any case. Also, it really was maddening watching the two of you skirt the issue." Solieyu said.

"And how are you and Luna?" Harry asked in a dry voice.

"Don't make me throw this book at you."

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"Well, here we are." Harry said.

Cedric nodded slowly. "Here we are."

Behind them, Fleur made a face. "What kind of challenge is *this*?"

"One probably loaded with traps. I'm pretty sure those hybrid abominations Hagrid was breeding - the ones that survived the year, anyway - are in there. What the hell did he call them again?" Asked Harry, turning to Cedric.

"Blast-Ended Skrewts. He had *all* the students in his class helping on some form or another." Cedric said. "I was glad to see them go."

"What is a... a..." Fleur began, frowning at the bizarre name.

"No idea. Best imagine a giant cockroach that can both bite you and set you on fire." Cedric said.

"Wonderful." Fleur muttered.

"Where's Krum, anyway?" Asked Harry.

Three of the four Champions were standing down near the maze's entrance with a man Harry didn't quite recognize. Strangely, Viktor Krum was nowhere to be seen, and the Task would be starting in under five minutes.

"Dunno. Haven't seen him all day." Cedric said.

"Fleur? You or Gabrielle seen him?" Harry asked.

"We have not." Fleur said. "Maybe he has gotten lost?"

"Doubtful. I don't like thi-- oh, there he is." Harry said, glancing up towards the school, where Krum was finally exiting.

"I was held up." Came his quiet reply as he joined the group.

"Well! Now that you're all here," Started the man, smiling pleasantly at them all, "I can tell you what you'll be doing."

Harry sighed as he listened to the man explain the horribly obvious to the group. The only things Harry noted were that he confirmed that living creatures and traps were spread throughout the maze and that one could get aid by sending up red sparks. That didn't sound good. How the hell mean *were* those Skrewt things of Hagrid's, anyway?

They would be entering in waves in order of their point totals. Harry would be heading in third. He watched as Cedric and Krum were let into the maze after the regular cannon shot signaled the start of the Task.

"Good luck." Harry murmured to Fleur before he started forward.

"And to you as well." Said the veela girl, smiling as she watched Harry enter.

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"Oh, I'm gonna punch someone in the face." Harry growled darkly as he rounded yet another corner. This horrible maze was a giant death trap! He had already avoided two different types of pits and blasted a Blast-Ended Skrewt apart. He had also had to run away from a rather angry acromantula. Harry had Cedric to thank for getting that one off his back.

Harry had burst from around a corner, running as fast as the tight quarters of the maze would allow, and had nearly collided with Cedric. The two looked at one another for the briefest of moments before Harry grinned and took off running in the direction Cedric had come from. A few moments later, he heard the Hufflepuff cry out, "POTTER, YOU JACKASS! GET **BACK** HERE!"

But now he had lost his sense of direction and his Point-Me spell seemed not to want to respond. It was horribly cramped down some of the passageways in the maze and, though he didn't suffer claustrophobia, he did feel like the walls were closing in on him at times.

It took a few areas to realize that, in certain spots, the walls *were* closing in on him. The maze was physically moving about! Harry stared and watched as it shifted behind him, closing off the path he had just entered from.

"Forget the punch, I'm gonna blast the bits off the guy who thought this one up." Harry said.

What felt like nearly half an hour later, Harry ran into Cedric once again. The Hufflepuff wasted no time in slugging Harry in the shoulder and glaring at him. "Thanks for leaving me with *YOUR* little problem!"

"Better you than me." Harry said, smirking. "You figured out the stupid plantlife is moving about on its own?"

"Yeah. I don't like it. Think we should just blast our way towards what *might* be the center?" Asked Cedric.

"We could. But Fleur or Krum might take the chance to rush for the Cup." Harry said.

"Speaking of, have you run by either of them?"

Harry shook his head. "Not Krum. Fleur I passed once about ten minutes ago."

"I haven't seen either." Cedric said. "Damn it, how are we supposed to work out which way to go when we can't work out *WHICH WAY TO GO?*"

Harry was about to reply when a shriek made both of them jump.

"Fleur." Harry said.

"This way!" Cedric said, running down a pathway to the south.

Harry quickly caught up and the two came upon the sight at the same time - Krum had his wand at a crumpled Fleur, who was letting out short bursts of screams every few seconds. Both Harry and Cedric had pulled their wands and took aim at the same time. While Cedric tried to simply disarm Krum, Harry slung a Bolt at his hand. The Bolt arrived first, but it hit just as Krum turned to aim at them.

It hit Krum's wand at the same time as Cedric's disarming spell had, first snapping the device into multiple pieces then sending those flying. Krum glared at the two before turning to try and run. But, as the direction he turned to run in was little more than a straight corridor, Harry and Cedric had no problem in petrifying the older boy.

"What the hell was *that?!?*" Cedric asked, kneeling next to Fleur. "...She's hurt, but I don't see anything by way of wounds..."

"That looked an awful lot like the Cruciatus, don't you think?" Asked Harry, eyes narrowed.

"It did." Cedric said. "Fleur! Hey, Fleur! Are you okay?"

"Of course she isn't. And I doubt she can hear you. Probably out like a light." Harry said. "Take her wand and send up sparks with it."

Cedric did just that as Harry aimed at Krum and levitated him back into the tiny room they were all in. "Think we should wait until help arrives?"

Cedric glanced at Fleur once more before standing. "I think we should get to the center as quick as possible and get this over with. I'm not sure they'd let us just stop."

"Yeah. Krum isn't going anywhere." Harry said. "And Fleur should be alright. I hope. I'm sure the spell wasn't on her long enough to cause any permanent damage..."

"I hope so." Cedric said. "...Well, shall we go, then?"

"Yeah. I think we should stick together, though. And..." Harry began, aiming at the hedge itself, growled, "We're taking the shortest route possible now that we're apparently out of outside challengers."

And with that, Harry and Cedric began blasting huge holes in the hedge maze. Though the maze tried to cover its blasted areas, it wasn't quick enough. Within a few minutes, the two had found the large, open room at the center. There, on a small pedestal, was the Triwizard Cup.

"This is what we've been fighting for." Cedric said as he approached.

"Whoever put my name in that Goblet will realize that I'm stronger than expected." Harry said.

"You did well, given your age." Cedric said.

"I'm not *that* young." Harry scowled.

Cedric just smirked.

"...So now what?" Asked Harry. "Who gets the Cup?"

"I was wondering the same thing. You really should have it. You've made the most impressive showing." Cedric said.

"But I'm not the real Hogwarts Champion." Harry pointed out. "The last thing I want is *more* fame."

"Point taken. But even so..."

Harry sighed. "This is going to get us nowhere. Why don't we just grab it at the same time?"

"Are we allowed to do that?" Asked Cedric.

"*HANG* what we're allowed to do!" Harry exclaimed. "We're both from Hogwarts, Hogwarts will win either way, and we'd probably stand here arguing over which of us should get the thing until nightfall if we don't."

Grinning, Cedric nodded. "Probably, yes. Well, as long as you're fine with the idea, so am I." The Hufflepuff then extended his right hand out to Harry.

Harry looked at it for a moment before smiling and shaking hands. "Good show. Now let's grab the Cup and get this Tournament over with."

"Deal."

Harry and Cedric reached out, each grabbing hold of one side of the Cup at the same time. But when they did, Harry knew something wasn't right. He felt something hook behind his navel. The world seemed to slide out of focus around him, save for Cedric, who seemed to be moving in slow motion. The two caught each other's eyes as the world started to spin out of control around them.

They landed in the dirt. Wherever they were, it was dark out. Too dark. It almost felt unnatural. Standing, the two boys looked around and saw that they were now standing in a run-down graveyard. A rather old graveyard, judging from how run down it was. Headstones had been cracked and splintered all around the location, and larger, more eerie tombstones looked like they could cave in on themselves at any moment.

"Harry...?" Cedric whispered.

"Yeah. Portkey." Harry whispered back.

"Where are we?"

"No idea."

"...How do we get back?"

"No idea."

"You don't get back." Came a voice from their right. A voice that made Harry's blood run cold. He knew that voice.

"**WORMTAIL!**" Harry roared.

Peter Pettigrew, carrying some sort of blanketed bundle, stepped out from the shadows, a horrible smile on his pale face. "Hello Harry. Nice to see you again."

"Harry? Who is that?" Asked Cedric.

But Harry's voice wasn't the one that replied. Instead, an awful, croaking voice came from the bundle Pettigrew was carrying. "You'll never need to know. Wormtail - kill the spare!"

"Yes, Master." Said Pettigrew, drawing his wand and aiming at Cedric. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

"**MOVE!**" Harry yelled, throwing his weight against Cedric. The two collapsed to the ground in a heap, both scrambling to get up. The Killing Curse had barely missed them and Pettigrew looked to be aiming a second shot.

"No." Came the voice in the bundle. "Perhaps we can... *use* the other."

"Use him?" Asked Pettigrew, not taking his eyes off of Harry and Cedric. "What do you mean, Master?"

"You shall see. Tie them up!" Croaked the voice.

"No one's tying me up!" Harry snarled. "*EXP--*"

Harry never got to finish his spell. He felt something hit him from the side and his wand went flying into the air. Whirling, he saw a man in black robes standing off on the other side of the graveyard, a white mask gleaming on his face.

In the time Harry was turning to see who had taken his wand, Wormtail had changed targets and took Cedric's away. The next thing Harry knew, he had been magically shoved back and tied up to a giant, stone angel. Cedric was in a similar situation, struggling against the magical ropes that now binded him.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" Harry yelled.

But the figure made no motion to move nor reply.

Harry jerked and twisted, but the ropes offered no give. He knew he was stuck. And he had a good idea of what the hell Wormtail was holding onto so well. He was now headed for a large cauldron in the center of the graveyard.

"Cedric." Harry whispered quickly. "Can you get free?"

"No... Harry, what the hell's going on?" Asked Cedric, a note of panic in his voice.

Harry had to admit, Cedric was keeping amazingly calm, all things considered. "I think we're about to bear witness to Voldemort's rebirth."

"WHAT?"

"Look. Wormtail's unwrapping whatever he's ...What in the name of Azathoth...?"

A hideous looking lump of flesh was squirming beneath the various blankets that had been wrapped around it. It had a head highly disproportionate to its body. Two giant, bug-like red eyes and a twisted, deformed mouth took up most of the thing's face, and Harry couldn't see a nose. The body, if one could even call it that, was barely formed and one of the legs looked atrophied. The stumpy limbs moved very little and only one hand had any fingers on it.

The horrible little thing had its giant eyes aimed towards Harry, who scar had started burning ever since he had arrived. He knew that feeling. Looking at Quirrell had produced the same effect. Only it was far more pronounced now than it had been then.

"Harry Potter." Croaked the thing, its mouth barely working and sagging in odd directions. "How nice of you to be here..."

"Hello, Tom." Harry hissed. "Planning a get-together, are we?"

"Do not call me by that name again." Squealed the creature, its limbs flailing about violently.

"Hit a nerve, did I?" Asked Harry, smirking.

"Harry! Shut *up*! Do you want to get us *killed*?" Asked Cedric in a high-pitched voice.

"He's not going to kill us. Not yet, anyway." Harry said quietly. "I'm trying to work out a plan. Irritating that thing and stalling whatever they're gonna use that cauldron for will buy me time. I'm open to suggestions."

"Wormtail!" Screeched the ball of flesh. "It is time..."

"Yes, Master." Said Pettigrew. Harry noted that he seemed to be nervous about something.

Pettigrew unceremoniously then dumped the writhing baby-like thing into the cauldron and turned towards Harry, grabbing an elegant-looking dagger from a tombstone as he approached.

'Drown!' Harry mentally cried, his eyes locked on the cauldron. *'DROWN! If there were ever a time for Fate to be kind to me, it's now! DROWN, DAMN IT!'*

"I'm sorry for this, Harry." Said Pettigrew in his squeaky voice. "But it's for the greater good, you know."

Harry spat at the thin man. "What do you know about *good*, you traitor?!"

"Now now... musn't be angry." Said Pettigrew, holding the dagger up.
"Now then... shall we begin?"

"What the hell are you planning?!" Yelled Cedric. "Let us go!"

"Quiet, boy." Said Pettigrew, bringing the dagger up towards Harry's right arm and pulling a small bottle from his pocket. "My business is with Harry."

"Get away from me you damned...!" Harry began. His sentence never found an end, however, as Pettigrew had slashed at his arm as he spoke.

He bit back a scream of pain as the blood that spilled out was collected in the bottle. He wouldn't give Wormtail the satisfaction of hearing him cry out.

Pettigrew smiled as he held up the bottle of blood and proceeded to walk back towards the cauldron. He threw the dagger aside and grabbed an arm bone from the top of one of the headstones as he moved.

And then...

Then it started. Harry could only watch in horror at what unfolded next. The bone was dropped into the sickening pot, followed by Harry's blood. As Pettigrew added the ingredients, he was reciting some kind of incantation. Whatever Harry had expected him to do, it wasn't what came next. The man went back to grab the dagger he had tossed aside, returned to the cauldron, and proceeded to lob off his own hand.

"Flesh, blood, and bone..." Harry whispered. "No..."

"Harry...?"

An explosion filled the silence, causing both teens to jump and stare at the cauldron again. As Pettigrew sat slouched on the ground, clutching his bloody stump, the cauldron began to crack and a horrible, hissing noise echoed throughout the graveyard.

A hand shot out from the bubbling mess, the skeletal fingers on it wriggling in the air before it fell to one side, clutching at the rim of the cauldron. Another shot forth, repeating the process. And then the creature began to pull itself out. The head of the monster looked almost like what Harry had seen sticking out of the back of Quirrel's head so many years ago. Almost. The skin was inhumanly grey and there was no nose to speak of. Rather, it had a pair of slits where its nose should have been. The eyes, once giant and red on the baby-like thing, were now sunken and slit-like. There was no hair on its head and its mouth curled into a horrible grin that seemed to pull back the skin on his face.

"WORMTAIL." Said the newly-resurrected Voldemort in a voice that was still high-pitched and croaky, **"CLOTHE ME."**

Sobbing, Pettigrew shakily got to his feet and grabbed at a simple robe that was on the ground nearby. As best he could, he helped Voldemort into it as he stepped from the cauldron. The Dark Lord was almost shaky at first, his new feet unused to holding weight on them. As he stood, Pettigrew fell to the ground once more.

Voldemort turned then, looking directly at Harry. The moment it happened, Harry felt his scar erupt in pain. A moment later, blood was trickling down and into his eyes.

"Potter." Hissed Voldemort as he walked towards Harry, almost seeming to glide across the rough terrain of the graveyard. "How good of you to come."

Harry didn't reply. Or rather, he wasn't able to. The sheer amount of pain coming from his scar was almost enough to cause him to pass out. He was doing good to remain conscious. But Voldemort seemed not to care. His gaze went from Harry to Cedric, who cringed.

Glancing back to Harry, Voldemort smiled. "Wormtail. Bring me my wand."

"Y-yes, Master..." Whimpered Pettigrew, making his way over. "M-Master... my arm..."

"Ah, yes." Said Voldemort, his voice finally straightening out and lowering in pitch. "You, who has never defied me..."

As soon as he had his wand, Voldemort waved his arm around Pettigrew's bloody stump. The thinner man let out a howl of pain as a small, silver gauntlet of sorts was fused in place. A replacement for the hand he had sacrificed. Shortly after, Voldemort jerked at the sleeve on Pettigrew's robes, placing his hand against a mark that was there.

As Pettigrew stood, amazed at his gift, though drawing in sharp breaths at the same time, Voldemort turned back to Harry. "I believe... we need to talk."

"I'm not... talking to you..." Harry hissed through the pain.

"Oh, I think you will." Said Voldemort, bringing his wand up to run it along the spot where Wormtail had slashed at him. "I think you will tell me everything I want to know."

"And why is *that*?" Harry spat.

"Because I can show you pain unlike that which you have ever known." Voldemort purred.

"Torture me all you want. I won't talk!" Harry growled.

"Torture you? Whoever said I was going to torture you?" Asked Voldemort.

"Then what are you... oh god. No. Don't."

"*Crucio*."

The words left the Dark Lord's mouth in a silky coo, the spell striking Cedric right in the chest. The Hufflepuff immediately began to scream and writhe where he was, his head bashing back into the statue he was tied to. Voldemort erupted into a harsh laugh, taking in the boy's pain as though it were giving him strength.

"STOP IT!" Harry screamed. "STOP IT OR I'LL--"

"Kill me?" Asked Voldemort. "You can never kill me, Potter. Have you not learned that yet?"

"I'm not the same as I was three years ago." Harry growled.

"I'm sure you aren't. But neither, as you can plainly see, am I." Said Voldemort. And, aiming his wand up at Cedric once more, he sent the Cruciatus at the boy again. And once more Cedric's screams split the silence of the night.

"*STOP IT, DAMN YOU!*" Harry yelled. "Fine! I'll talk! Whatever you want, just *STOP!*"

"Hmm... no, I don't believe I will. Your window of opportunity has passed, dear Harry." Said Voldemort, lowering his wand and releasing Cedric from the curse. Cedric slumped forward, his breathing ragged. "I will, however, cease my cursing of this boy on one condition."

"That being?"

"That you join me." Said Voldemort, smiling. "I can feel the power radiating off of you. You have grown much stronger since the last time I saw you. Follow me, Harry, and we will control this pathetic world."

"I'd sooner die than join you." Harry whispered.

"Would you sooner your *friend* die?" Asked Voldemort, arm snapping up again.

"No!" Harry cried.

"I will make you join me, Potter. One way or another." Said Voldemort. "I have given you your chance. And now I await to hear you *beg* to join forces with me!"

"Harry..." Choked Cedric weakly. "Don't... don't..."

"Quiet!" Voldemort screeched. "You will be quiet or I will give you *cause* to open your filthy mouth!"

"Fight him." Whispered Cedric. He then burst into screams again as Voldemort once more struck him with the Cruciatus.

"I warned you." Said Voldemort, his soft voice seeming to echo. "Potter - join me now and this can all end. We can rule together, you and I."

Harry's eyes darted aside to Cedric. Whispering a silent apology to the boy as he took in what Cedric has said, he growled out a firm, "Go to hell."

Voldemort's slit-like eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you do not understand." He began, stepping around so that he was directly in front of Cedric now, his wand still pointed as he kept the curse going. "You do not defy me. I am Lord Voldemort. And you *will* bow down to me!"

"I said go to hell." Harry hissed, voice sliding into Parseltongue. "Perhaps *you* do not understand."

What happened next occurred so fast Harry barely had time to take it in. Voldemort had his wand raised high, it slashed down violently, and Cedric made the most god-awful scream Harry had ever heard in his life.

Cedric's left arm, disconnected from his body, now lay at the Dark Lord's feet.

And then Cedric was silenced in a burst of green light.

Harry screamed. At the same time, his wild magic also broke free, sending out tongues of magical energy throughout the area and shattering the tombstone he was tied to. Pettigrew was caught in the blast and knocked over. The magic let go of Harry and continued outward in a kind of magical shockwave, breaking headstones and kicking up the earth as it went. Throughout all of this, Voldemort had a shield spell up, keeping out anything unwanted.

Dropping to the ground, Harry threw his arms out in the directions his and Cedric's wands had been thrown. They rattled and flew into his hands as though being summoned. Quickly standing up as best he

could through his pain and anger, Harry aimed both wands at Voldemort.

Voldemort lowered his shield, laughing quietly. "Ahh, have I finally angered you? Very good. Let us see what kind of power lies within that anger. Attack me, Potter!"

As Harry started slinging spell after spell at Voldemort, the loud *CRACKS* of people apparating in started to fill the air. Voldemort continued to laugh as he easily blocked everything Harry threw at him.

He was beyond rational thought. Harry could no sooner think of a plan out than he could win. The only things he knew were that Death Eaters were arriving quickly and that he was no match for Voldemort even in his still-weakened state.

When the sound of *CRACKS* stopped coming, Voldemort turned to glance across the graveyard. Dozens of people stood in outfits similar to the one on the man who had been disarmed Harry.

"Welcome back, my Death Eaters." Said Voldemort, turning to walk away from Harry, who continued to try striking the Dark Lord down somehow.

As Voldemort gave a speech to his followers, Harry's mind started to refocus slightly. He was trapped, he didn't know how to apparate, and he was vastly outnumbered and outmatched. Cedric was dead and minus one limb. Harry was bleeding from two places and nothing he threw at Voldemort was having any effect at all. This was bad. This was hellishly *bad*.

Harry's eyes darted around. There *might* be one way... but it would require an incredible amount of skill and luck. The skill he thought he could produce. The luck, however... well, that was clearly against him at the moment. If he tried doing anything, chances were that everyone present would try killing him. And even he couldn't dodge that many spells.

His ears picked up on Voldemort addressing him, and he turned to glare at the snakelike man.

"--come over here and duel me *properly*. It is what you've been trying to do, is it not?" Said the Dark Lord, making a sweeping motion with one hand. His Death Eaters parted and moved to stand in a circular position. "Let us see what you can truly do. I promise that our duel will not be interrupted. It will be you versus me."

'I can't win.' Harry thought. *'But... but maybe...'*

Lowering his wands, Harry gave Voldemort a nod and slowly started his way over. Leaving the area meant moving away from the faint trace of safety he felt, but he had little choice in the matter.

He would either fight Lord Voldemort or he would die.

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Chapter 21 – Those Who Live

Harry walked forward slowly, his breathing ragged, as he walked into what was obviously meant to be the place he was to die in.

As he got into the circle that Voldemort had jury-rigged using his followers, Harry asked, "Surely you won't let me fight with a bleeding arm and with blood dripping into my eyes."

Voldemort looked down his nonexistent nose at Harry for a moment before chuckling. "I know you merely say that to try and gain an advantage... but I assure you, being able to see better will not help you. Very well, I will grant you this. A last request fulfilled."

The hair on the back of Harry's neck stood on end as Voldemort lazily waved his wand. But the blood had been cleaned from around Harry's eyes and his right arm wasn't hurting as much anymore.

*'Heh. Egotistical bastard. I didn't ask to see **YOU** easier'* Harry thought as he rubbed at his forehead. "...Better."

"Now then. Duel me, Potter." Voldemort said, raising his wand.

"Before I do... I want to know who disarmed me." Harry said, glancing around at the crowd of Death Eaters.

"Ah yes. I had almost forgotten. Step forward!"

One of the robed minions stepped away from the crowd and bowed low before Voldemort. "Yes, Master?"

"You may show Potter your face."

"Yes, Master."

The man stood and turned, facing Harry. The hand not clasping his wand moved up to the white mask covering his face. He took hold of it and pulled it away. Harry's breath felt like it had abandoned him. Lucius Malfoy smirked over at Harry, his silky hair pulled back and hidden by the hood still covering his head. "Potter."

"You!" Harry cried.

"Me." Said Lucius, nodding at Harry.

"That will be all, Lucius." Said Voldemort, bringing up a hand.

"Yes, My Lord." Said Lucius, turning and walking back to stand among the others, slipping his mask in place once more as he walked.

'Not surprising but still unexpected. Malfoy's old man actually being here to see his lord get resurrected.' Harry thought. 'I'm gonna hafta move fast.'

"One last thing." Harry said. "...Will I be able to use both wands?"

"One, both, whichever you please." Said Voldemort patiently.

"...Fine. Let's get this over with." Harry said, bringing both wands up and crossing them, nodding his head only slightly.

Addressing the Death Eaters, Voldemort said, "None of you may interfere with this! Those that do will suffer a fate worse than death." And then, turning to Harry, he continued, "Now, let us begin, Potter. Look, I am even generous enough to give you the first strike!"

The Dark Lord extended his arms out to his sides, an evil smile on his face.

'Tsk. Show-off.' Harry thought. *'Cedric, I hope you'll lend me your strength on this. It's going to need to be big.'*

Harry aimed both wands forward at Voldemort, both arms a bit higher than they should have been for an attack. Voldemort seemed to notice this, smirking. But what Harry was planning was not an attack. It wasn't even to bring up a shield first. Nor was it to summon anything.

"**Smile.**" Harry hissed in Parseltongue. A split second later, a blinding flash of light erupted from both of the wands in his hands. Voldemort, whose newborn eyes were still very sensitive, let out a howl of pain and staggered back. The Death Eaters weren't expecting a mere light

spell either. And though their masks helped keep them from getting the full brunt of the brightness, they had been instructed not to interfere.

The minute the spell went off, Harry turned and took off running back towards the tombstone where Cedric's lifeless body still hung. He was now hanging lopsided, as one arm lie on the ground, and the tombstone itself was coated in blood.

Harry noted that Voldemort was screaming at his Death Eaters to do something, but Harry knew there would be a moment's hesitation on their part. That was all he needed. Diving for the body, he spun and summoned the Triwizard Cup. As he grabbed hold of Cedric's good arm with one hand, the Cup flew into his other.

The last thing Harry heard was Voldemort letting out a hellish scream.

He had escaped.

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When Harry landed, more screams filled the air. He was on the pitch, that much he knew. But that was all he could work out. The pitch was now devoid of the maze. The stands above were in chaos. Harry, whose robes were slightly torn up and coated in blood, was kneeling next to the prone body of Cedric Diggory, who was coated in even more blood and missing an arm.

It took mere seconds for everything to sink in. Harry felt the rush leave his body, the feeling of danger draining out of him. He had escaped... but at what price? If he had just grabbed the stupid Cup by himself, none of this would have happened! Cedric would still be alive...

Harry's hand, shaking violently, still clutched Cedric's arm even as Dumbledore quickly walked up to him.

"Harry?" Asked the old man gently. "Harry, what has happened?"

Harry turned his head jerkily to look up at the headmaster. "...He's back." Were the only words that would come from his mouth.

Dumbledore almost seemed to search his eyes for a moment before nodding gravely. "I see."

"Albus!" Growled the voice of Mad-Eye Moody, who was quickly making his way over. "We've got problems! The whole damn place is going mad! People are trying to get onto the field and the Diggorys have started their way here!"

Dumbledore nodded. "Get Harry inside, Alastor. I will see to the Diggorys."

"Right. Come on then, Potter. To your feet." Said Moody, his voice taking a softer tone.

But it still took a bit of persuading for Harry to finally release Cedric's arm and follow Moody from the pitch. The grizzled old man kept a hand on the center of Harry's back as he led him up towards Hogwarts, sending a death glare at anyone who dared get close to them. "Come on. Let's get you somewhere quiet."

Harry allowed himself to be led up a few flights of stairs and into an empty classroom. Moody showed Harry to a seat, which he slumped down into. Moving up towards the dusty desk at the front of the room, Moody watched Harry for a few moments. He was shaking almost as if chilled and his eyes were focusing and unfocusing at a steady rate. He hadn't blinked in minutes.

"Potter. What happened?" Asked Moody finally.

"He's back." Was all Harry said again. "He's... he's back."

"Who, Potter? *Who* is back?" Asked Moody.

"Voldemort." Croaked Harry.

"What? Are you sure?"

"I saw him... I saw... Pettigrew was there and... and he had this *thing* in a blanket. He... he cut my arm and took my blood... threw it into a cauldron. There... he came out of it and summoned the Death Eaters. I... I blinded him. Got away." Harry said.

His brain felt detached. He had never quite felt like this in his entire life. Now that he was in no danger of being slaughtered, Harry's body was catching up to him. He had been pushing himself harder than he had thought. He couldn't focus on anything and his brain wouldn't let him concentrate. He couldn't speak properly and it was only by the grace of some higher power than he was even still awake and capable of sitting up.

"Are you positive?" Asked Moody. "Are you sure you actually saw him?"

"Course I did." Harry said. "He killed Cedric... he..."

"Shh. Try not to think about it." Moody said, walking back towards Harry. "I only have one important question for you now, Potter. I want you to think hard before answering, alright?"

"Kay."

"Did he do anything to the Death Eaters that came?"

Harry glanced up at Moody, frowning. "What?"

Moody fixed Harry with a hard look and repeated, "Did he do anything to the Death Eaters that came?"

"No. No, not that I can remember..." Harry said, brow creased. "Told them to stay out of our fight..."

"You... *fought* the Dark Lord?" Asked Moody.

"Yeah. Kinda. Like I said - blinded him to get away." Harry said, making a vague gesture with a shaking hand.

"That is excellent news, Potter." Said Moody.

"What is?" Asked Harry. Why the hell was Moody asking so damn many questions, anyway? Harry couldn't make his brain fire properly.

"Merely curious." Said Moody, who reached back and drew out his wand. "Was wondering if it was safe to return. That's all."

"What?" Harry asked, his voice quiet.

Moody smiled. "Didn't hear me clearly, Potter? I said I was wondering if it was safe to return! Now I know I can go back to him without risk of death."

"You..." Harry began. Something in his chest tightened. "**YOU**... You **did** put my name into the Goblet of Fire!"

Moody let out a barking laugh. "Very good, Potter! Ten points to Ravenclaw! Yes, you stupid boy, of course I did. I'd heard talk of you. I knew you'd be foolish enough to go along with whatever Albus told you to do! There was nothing preventing you from sitting put in your little hole in the ground and not coming to any of the Tasks."

"But... it was... and wait, you knew about...?"

"A magically binding contract? Hah. No more binding than giving a man your word on something." Gruffed Moody, aiming his wand at Harry. "And yes, I saw you and your little friends coming and going from that so-called secret chamber of yours. Shame I never got to do anything to any of them. But that would have been too risky. I needed to stay alive and keep my secret guarded long enough to get that Cup rigged."

"I knew it..." Harry whispered. "I knew you had to be able to see in. I knew you put my name in the Goblet! **I KNEW IT!**"

"And yet you didn't discuss it with Albus. Or, at least, you didn't in a way that made him have one of his insipid little *talks* with me over it." Moody said, grinning crookedly.

"Why?" Asked Harry, staring at Moody's wand.

"Why? Because I was a spy. I gave the Dark Lord information from Dumbledore's stupid Order of the Phoenix. In return, My Lord allowed me to 'capture' several of our lower-ranked members. One has to make sacrifices, after all." Said Moody.

"Order of the Phoenix?" Harry repeated.

"Yes. A silly little band of do-gooders that Albus decided to put together in the *last* war. Fat lot of good it did him. You ended up dispatching our Lord and sending us scurrying for alibies. Thankfully, I had remained free from suspicion the whole time. Oh, the men and women I brought in would often try accusing me. But Albus was always there to stand up for me. Said I was no more a Death Eater than *he* was. People follow those with power, Potter. Surely you know that."

Harry just stared. This was too much to take in. Too much for one day. Harry's brain was already working overtime trying to sort out what he had just been through. But having all of this told to him? He looked back up at Moody and asked, "Aren't you worried about me telling someone else?"

Moody laughed again. "Telling someone else?! You're going to *die* here, Potter. Oh, my spying days will be done with, sure. But it will be worth it."

Harry was silent as Moody continued to speak, telling Harry about how he had gotten his name put in the Goblet. How he had been the one to convince Dumbledore to give Harry Snape's precious, tattered potions book. How he had rigged the Cup exactly as he had been instructed to.

Harry's mind had almost shut down. He couldn't take the overload of information. It was all too much, even for him. When he found himself capable of coherent speech again, however, he interrupted Moody's ongoing explaining.

"It's your fault." He whispered.

"Of *course* it's my fault, idiot boy. Pay attention!" Moody barked.

"It's your fault he's dead..." Harry continued, ignoring Moody.

"Who?"

"Cedric's!" Harry hissed, teeth clamped tightly. "It's your fault Cedric's dead!"

"Who cares if he's dead? More will be now that my Lord has returned to us." Said Moody, his face twisting into an evil smile.

The air around Harry crackled. Before Moody could react, Harry's wild magic had triggered again, throwing the old man across the room and into the wall. Harry could hear the *CRACK* as his head bounced off of it. Shakily getting to his feet and still clutching both his own wand as well as Cedric's, Harry aimed at his Defense Professor.

"It's your fault..."

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Tonks had her face buried against George Weasley's chest. The twins had met up with Solieyu, Luna, and Tonks midway up to the school after seeing that Harry had been moved. When they reached the doors, it was to find McGonagall stating that they weren't allowed to enter and go after him.

The group had moved off to the side and Tonks had immediately broken down. George had offered to let the girl cry on him if she needed a place to. He now patted the girl's back as he talked with his brother about what they had seen.

"What do you think happened?" George asked.

"Portkey, from the look of it." Fred answered, staring back towards the pitch, which was still in chaos. "You can't apparate on Hogwarts grounds."

"Must have been the Cup." George said. "Only thing it could have been."

"We need to get to Harry somehow." Solieyu said, hands balled up. "Moody's the last person I want him to be around right now. You know how he feels about him."

"Yeah, we know." Fred said. "No way past McGonagall though."

"Only viable option is going through the tunnel at the Willow and somehow getting into the school through the Hogsmeade tunnel. And that would take too long." George said.

Luna clung to Solieyu, shaking slightly. She hadn't quite fully processed everything she had seen, but it was enough to unnerve her. Solieyu glanced down at her and wrapped an arm around her eventually.

"We have to get to him." Came Tonks' quiet voice as she pulled away from George, rubbing her eyes. "I need to get to him..."

"Look." Solieyu said. "Dumbledore's coming up. Maybe we can get in when he does."

"Worth a shot." Fred said. "Let's go."

"And if Moody tries anything..." George began.

"We'll make him wish he never existed." Fred finished, nodding.

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It took much doing, but Dumbledore agreed to let Harry's friends accompany himself, Snape, and McGonagall. The school almost seemed to shift as the group made their way through it. No one talked as they traveled, as Dumbledore had said that something in the school didn't feel right. No one wanted to think too hard on what that might mean.

"Up there." Said Dumbledore quietly, pointing out a room down the hall.

Solieyu drew in a sharp breath as they got closer. "Faster!" He suddenly yelled. "Something's wrong with Harry!"

The group broke into a run. Tonks felt as though she couldn't breathe. The twins had long since drawn their wands and looked to have been cycling through every nasty thing they could possibly think of. Only Solieyu knew what was happening. He was the only one who knew

that Harry himself was in no danger. It was...something worse than that.

Dumbledore threw open the door with his hand as they drew near. But no one save the vampire were expecting to see what they did.

Moody was pinned against the far wall of the room with large railroad spikes driven through his hands. Blood was dripping from the wounds to the floor. His face was a bleeding mess and he looked to almost be hanging limp. Dumbledore was quick to realize what Harry was going to do and took aim. Just as Harry's arm spiraled forward to connect with the Invidia Eximo, Dumbledore's unspoken spell hit.

The spell's delayed trigger took effect as Harry was sent flying. As a result, 'only' Moody's right arm was blown apart. Harry crashed into a table and toppled over it to the floor as the headmaster rushed in. "Severus, stun him and follow us. Minerva, keep the children out of the hospital wing when we arrive."

Snape and McGonagall nodded. The Potions Master petrified the one-armed Moody and levitated him into the air. Across the room, Dumbledore was doing similar with Harry, minus the petrifying bit. Harry was quite clearly out cold all on his own.

Harry's friends hadn't made a noise the whole time, but all of them had seen the look on Harry's face as he flew forward with the Eximo. None of them had ever seen a look of sheer hatred like that on him in their lives.

In silence once more, the group headed towards the hospital wing in haste. Dumbledore was quick to set Harry gently on a bed before taking control of Moody's body and floating back out of the room. McGonagall stood outside the hospital doors to do as she had been instructed, while Snape remained inside long enough to help Madam Pomfrey out with inspecting Harry. Once his wounds were taken care of and Madam Pomfrey had assured Snape that she could handle things, he had nodded and taken his leave.

"What am I going to do with you?" Asked Madam Pomfrey with a sigh.

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Harry scowled.

He was back in his magical core, apparently.

"You know, this is a very boring place to be!" He yelled.

"It's your own fault if it is."

Harry started, jerking his head around. That wasn't the usual voice that spoke to him. No, this sounded like...

"You broke out again, did you?" Harry asked.

"No. What remains has been restored. I have been active since he has." Came the second, softer voice. "I helped you to escape."

Harry nodded slowly. "You really don't want to return to him, do you?"

"No. I don't. What remains is even further tainted from when I was a part of it." Said the voice. "It is twisted through necromancy."

"I was under the impression that necromancers couldn't do that. Not like what I saw." Harry said. "He wasn't one of the inferi!"

"It is an old and obscure branch of necromancy. You wouldn't know of it."

"So now what?"

"Now I am free. My integration into your core has already begun. It is, I think, the only reason you are still alive."

"What happens when the merge is complete?"

"You will feel stronger. That is all."

"That's it? No... no Darkness, right?"

"Terrible word, that." Said the voice. "No. What you have done tonight was survive."

"But... I was going to kill Moody."

"Yes. You were."

"Isn't that Dark, though?! My emotions certainly *felt* Dark! I *wanted* him to die! I wanted him to suffer like Cedric suffered!" Harry screamed.

"I understand that. But you must understand that those feelings are natural. When someone close to you is murdered, you naturally want vengeance on the guilty. And what options were there? To let him live is to give him a chance at escape. If he escapes, more innocents would die. Laying waste to the guilty is nothing to be ashamed of."

"It *is*, though! I don't *want* to feel the urge to kill!"

"You will need to eliminate what remains. You realize he will hunt you, do you not?"

Harry was silent at that. Slowly, he stretched out on the ground, the grass feeling cool and refreshing. "I just want it to be over. I want to live a normal life. Is that so wrong?"

"No. Unfortunately, you will have to continue fighting. He is weak still, but he will grow stronger." The voice said in what sounded like an apologetic tone.

"Let someone else fight." Harry whispered, closing his eyes.

"No one else is strong enough."

"Dumbledore's strong enough! Plenty of others are strong enough!"

"And they will, no doubt, go to war again. But you can surpass them with the proper training." Said the voice.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then the war will extend even longer than it is sure to as is."

"I have no choice, then."

"You do have a choice."

"No. I don't. I'm not evil. I won't just sit back and watch as Voldemort and the Death Eaters start to kill people again!" Harry yelled.

"Even if it means having to kill?" Asked the voice.

"...Even if it means having to kill." Said Harry.

The second voice went silent that. But soon the first, more familiar voice echoed in Harry's ears. "We will be whole soon. When it is completed, it will be time for you to wake up."

"How long will it take?"

"Six days, barring any incidents."

Harry nodded slowly, staring up at the clouds that were passing by overhead. There was little to do in his core's landscape unless he wanted to take a swim. Settling to just lay there in an attempt to ensure that his nerves weren't completely shattered, Harry let his eyes slip shut as he wondered how one could go to sleep when one was already passed out in the real world.

It was going to be a long six days.

Chapter 22 – Those Who Die

Harry sighed.

It was so extraordinarily boring where he was stuck. Thankfully, it was supposed to be the last day he was to spend there. He could feel when his magical core and the infection left by Voldemort finished fusing. A distinct jolt had shocked him out of his daydreaming. The landscape rippled briefly and was silent once more.

When the voice finally spoke, it was a mixture of both previous voices Harry had heard. The deep tone of the first and the soft tone of the second combined to create an almost hollow-sounding third voice.

"We are whole now." It said.

Sitting up, Harry smiled. "Well, that's good to know. Were there any complications?"

"Several. We feel that it was due to the potions being kept in your system. Their forced regeneration of your magic interfered with our merge. But it proved easy to work around. Have you felt any different?" Asked the voice.

"Not really. Been terrifically bored, but fine aside from that." Harry said.

"We understand. You may wake up at any time now. It is up to you to let us know when you are ready, though. We are now whole, but your body is still in chaos. Your brain may remain in a state of confusion and instability for some time."

"I had assumed as much. I'll be alright, though."

"Are you certain? We remember how upset you were at what you tried to do."

Harry sighed again, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I've had six days to think about it. I stand by what I did. I was furious and I wanted Moody to die. I still do. But I also know that I was at fault for trying to

do the job myself. Looking back on it with unclouded eyes, I'd much rather see him stuffed into Azkaban for the rest of his horrible life."

"The prison is not safe now." Said the voice.

"What?"

"What remains had plans for the prison when we were still a part of him. Had you not stopped him, he would have taken the prison as his own."

"Well that's just wonderful." Harry said, blowing out a long breath. "I'll try and tell Dumbledore when I wake up. He usually believes me. Much as I loathe him sometimes, he's still the strongest wizard alive that I'm aware of. He'll be able to get more people keeping watch at Azkaban."

"It may not be enough. What remains had a..." The voice paused for a moment before continuing carefully, "...slight amount of control over the soul eaters there."

"...So Voldemort could control the Dementors?"

"To an extent." Said the voice.

"Crap. This gets better all the time. Is there anything else about him that I should know about?" Asked Harry.

"Much. But now is not the time to learn. You will gain the knowledge you need when the time is right."

"You're no help at all, you know that? ...I think I'm ready to wake. Bit tired of sitting around in the field and taking a swim. No offense." Harry said.

"None taken." Came the voice. "Very well - if you are sure you wish to return, we will begin the process."

"I do." Harry said. "I want to see what's happened in the week I've been out for."

"We will be here when you need us." Said the voice as it seemed to drift away.

"I really need to manifest a body for that thing to speak out of." Harry said to himself as he got to his feet. "Maybe give it a name. Much easier to handle that way."

Sliding his hands into the pockets of his jeans, Harry looked to the sky and waited.

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The first thing Harry noticed when his eyes cracked open was the fact that it was dark out. He was rather thankful for that, as the last thing he needed was to blind himself upon waking. The second thing he noticed was the fact that Tonks was asleep in a chair next to his bed, her head tilted back in a very uncomfortable-looking position.

Reaching for his glasses, Harry sighed. Knowing Tonks, she had probably spent all of the time she could at his side, waiting for him. He only hoped that the rest of his friends were making sure she ate and slept well.

Harry reached over, gently shaking her shoulder. "Nymmy..."

"Nn..."

He smiled. "Nyymmmyyyyy. Time for schoooooool..."

"Dun wanna, mummy..." Tonks mumbled, moving slightly. This caused her head to tilt to one side. The sudden moment then caused her to wake with a start. "Wh-- football practice!"

"Football practice?" Harry asked.

Tonks nodded. "Yeah, was dreaming that I... I..."

She turned, eyes opening wide as she saw Harry, awake and sitting up, next to her. For a minute, Harry thought she was going to launch herself at him like she usually did when he awakened from a bad spill.

Instead, she got up, sat down on the edge of the bed he was in, and sort of collapsed against him.

"I thought you were never going to wake up." She whispered.

"I would have sooner, but the two parts of my core were combining into one. There was really nothing wrong with me." Harry said, wrapping his arms around the girl to pull her closer. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

"That's what Madam Pomfrey said, too." Tonks said, laying her head against his shoulder. "The part about nothing wrong with you, I mean. That was almost scarier than if you were all bloody. You were *fine*, but you wouldn't wake up..."

"I'll be alright, Nymmy. Always am." Harry said, leaning his head against hers. "What's been going on since I was knocked out?"

"Too much." Tonks sighed. "Dumbledore's been fighting off a flood of reporters. Fudge has been trying to bust in here almost daily. Cedric's body was taken away..."

Harry had to take a few slow breaths before speaking again. "Have his parents been around much?"

"No... but I heard his dad talking to Dumbledore. Said that they wanted to talk to you. Dumbledore said they could as soon as you woke up." Tonks said.

"I figured as much."

"Harry? What happened? One moment, we were seeing sparks going up somewhere... when the guards patrolling the edges went in and found Fleur and Krum, they immediately lowered the maze. You and Cedric were nowhere to be found. And... and then you just sort of reappeared all bloody with his body..." Tonks said, her voice hitching as she spoke.

Gently stroking the girl's hair, Harry began a recount of everything that had taken place the day of the Third Task. By the time he was

through, Tonks was outright clinging to him and crying quietly in his arms.

"It'll be okay." Harry whispered. "We'll get by. I'll fight him. The two core voices talked to me quite a bit while I was out. The infected part had a lot of info about Voldemort. I asked a lot of questions. It couldn't remember everything, but there was enough left that I got a bit of useful knowledge out of the ordeal."

"I don't want you to fight him again." Tonks whimpered. "I don't want you to keep putting yourself in danger!"

"I'll be in danger anyway. I escaped from him." Harry said. "He would seek me out even if I had never been to that graveyard. I *am* the reason he's been gone this long. Can't imagine he's very happy with me."

Tonks didn't respond, but she did clutch at Harry tighter.

"I'll beat him, Nymmy. For real this time. I just have to find a way to get around his power." Harry said. "He's not invincible."

When Tonks finally found her voice, she let out a soft laugh. "Not many people would have done what you did, you know. Bringing back Cedric and all."

"Wish I could have gotten his lost arm too, but... I was in a hurry." Harry said.

"Still. Most would have just grabbed the Cup and returned alone. And... even seeing how you looked that night, I still know you're *you*... That you haven't changed." Tonks said.

"You were there, huh?" Harry asked, looking away. "I... I really can't justify what I did to him. I just wanted him to *die*. I've never felt like that before. I've spent most of my time these last six days thinking about it."

"You looked scary." Tonks said, pulling away to look up at him. "I hope I never see that look in your eyes again."

"He was the reason I was in the tournament. It's mostly his fault that Cedric's dead. I... Yeah, I still blame myself a good deal for it, but..."

"You didn't kill him. Voldemort did."

"I know. But if I hadn't been so stubborn and just taken the Cup..."

"Then you might not be alive now."

Harry sighed, leaning back and closing his eyes. "I don't think I'll ever truly forgive myself for it, no matter how much I talk about it. At least I know it isn't entirely my own fault, though. Still..."

"No depression." Tonks said, pouting. "I've been depressed enough this week."

"Sorry."

Tonks leaned in to give Harry a quick peck on the cheek. "No apologizing, either. I'm just glad you're back and safe."

"It's good to be back. It's also good to be awake." Harry said, offering Tonks a small smile. "I'm...really hungry. Don't think Madam Pomfrey'd let me head back to the Pit to rest and eat, do you?"

"I stand by my scans. You're perfectly fine, Mr. Potter. A bit concerned over your emotional state, though." Said Madam Pomfrey's voice, causing both Harry and Tonks to jump.

"How long have you been there?" Asked Tonks.

"Long enough to hear what happened. You're a very lucky person, Mr. Potter." Said Madam Pomfrey, stepping closer and pulling her wand. "Now then, let me have a look at you again. If you're still reading as healthy, you're free to go."

Harry let the matron of the hospital poke and prod him with her wand until she was satisfied. "Well," She concluded, "You still seem to be fine. You're free to go back to whatever the 'Pit' is."

"Our secret hideout isn't staying very secret, it seems." Harry noted.

"Maybe she could have Dumbledore connect her fireplace to ours. It'd certainly save Leon some walking." Tonks suggested.

"You have a personal fireplace?" Asked Madam Pomfrey, eyebrows raised.

"Yeah. Dumbledore kinda fire called me awhile back. Startled me, too. Didn't even think he could do that." Harry said. "I think our fireplaces are still connected."

Rolling her eyes, Madam Pomfrey said, "I'll speak with Albus about it. Now listen up, Mr. Potter - I want you to go and get a light meal. A *LIGHT* one. Your body hasn't had food in it in almost a week. It's going to try kicking back anything heavy. Have a light meal and go to bed. I don't want you moving around much until you can eat properly again, which will probably take awhile. Would you like to take something down with you, or...?"

"Yes, ma'am." Harry said, slipping out of bed. "And we kind of have a room connected to the kitchens, too."

"Yes, I definitely need to speak with Albus about this." Madam Pomfrey said, shaking her head. "In any case, it's good to see you awake again. Now go and rest up."

Harry nodded and, after shoos the women away to change, he and Tonks headed back down to the Pit.

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"We have a guest." Tonks said as she entered the Pit.

Numerous sets of eyes turned towards the door as Harry and Tonks entered. Immediately, the room sprang to life. Tonks had to get between Harry and the rest of the people in the Pit to keep them from crowding him.

"Oi oi... C'mon, you lot. We can talk at the table. I need something to eat." Harry said, sidestepping the group. Switching to Parseltongue, he looked at the fireplace and added, "*We'll talk later.*"

"Good to see you again. We've been worried." Replied Boris, raising his head to look at Harry. *"Go. Get something in you. We'll have plenty of time to talk when it's less crowded."*

"Agreed." Harry hissed, opening the dining room's door and entering, a trail of people walking in behind them. Taking his usual seat at the far end of the table, he waited until everyone sat down before talking again. "I know you all have questions. I'm not sure how many I'll be able to answer, but... don't worry about asking."

For the second time in one night, Harry found himself recapping the events that lead to the end of the Triwizard Tournament. By the time he was finished, he looked tired. None of the others looked so good, either.

It was Pansy who spoke first, staring down at the table. "So... he's really back..."

"Yeah." Harry said, looking up. "...You going to be okay?"

"This summer's not going to be fun." Pansy said, closing her eyes. "It's not going to be fun for a lot of us. Slytherins, I mean. I'm not the only one with Death Eater parents."

"I wish I could just tell you lot to talk to Dumbledore, but besides the fact that I know few, if any, actually *would*, I'm not sure he'd be able to help." Harry said. "Though I've yet to talk to him. Maybe I can arrange something."

"You'd be surprised how many might go to him." Said Pansy, looking at Harry from the far end of the table. "But a lot of them will be too scared to, I think."

"The war is going to start again, isn't it?" Asked Ginny, quietly.

"Yeah. The only plus side, if there could be one to this, is that he's still weak. I got away with a damn light spell, for Merlin's sake. I lucked out again." Harry said, sighing.

There came a knock at the door, causing everyone to jump.

"Uh... come in?" Harry said, hand reaching for his wand. His eyebrows raised when Dumbledore opened the door and stepped in. "Professor Dumbledore! What are you doing here?"

"Poppy informed me that she discharged you. I came to see how you were doing." Said the headmaster, shutting the door behind him.

"As well as can be expected." Harry said.

Nodding, Dumbledore reached into his robes, producing a small, cloth sack that looked to be full. "I've brought down some Floo Powder with me. I have a feeling it will be useful."

Harry sighed once more and got to his feet. "Let's not dance around the issue. I can come to your office, if you'd like."

Setting the bag of Floo Powder down, Dumbledore smiled. "If you would feel more comfortable here, Harry, we do not have to leave."

"Really? Well... yeah, alright. I dunno if there's anymore room at the table, though." Harry said.

"Quite alright, Harry. I do not need to sit down. I will most likely need to leave as soon as you tell me what happened. I can, if you'd like, also tell *you* what has been happening since your return." Said Dumbledore.

"Tonks mentioned some of it. What's Fudge want?" Asked Harry.

"He seems to think you are mentally unstable, a murderer, and a serious threat to the school." Said Dumbledore, causing Harry to choke on his pumpkin juice.

"What?!" Harry cried. "That crazy old... ..Oh man, the rest of this year's gonna be a right pain, isn't it?"

Chuckling, Dumbledore walked around the table to put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "There will be many things to deal with in the coming weeks, yes."

"What happened to Moody?" Asked Harry, staring at his goblet.

"He is in a secluded room at St. Mungo's presently. He was only conscious long enough to be given truth serum in order to explain what he had done." Said Dumbledore.

"Good." Harry said. "But is St. Mungo's the best place for someone like him?"

"The hospital is very secure, I assure you." Dumbledore said. "Now then, before we continue..."

"Yeah. Kinda wished you had arrived a bit sooner. I'd just finished telling this lot." Said Harry.

"My apologies." Said Dumbledore. "I'm afraid I spent a good deal of time talking with Poppy."

"It's alright." Harry said. And, yet again, he explained the series of events that he had been through. When he finished, Dumbledore was nodding slowly.

"It speaks a great deal about your character that you brought Mr. Diggory back with you." Dumbledore said, his voice softer now.

"Even though I tried dismantling Moody almost directly after?" Harry said, making a face.

"I'm afraid I owe you an apology in that regard, Harry."

"What? Why?"

"For not seeing what was right in front of me, so to speak." Said the headmaster. "I have always trusted Alastor. To think that he would be the cause of your torment this year as well as being a spy in the last war on Voldemort..."

"We all make mistakes." Harry said, smiling faintly. "Sir, Tonks said she heard you talking to Cedric's father..."

"Ah, yes." Said Dumbledore, a note of sadness in his voice now. "Amos has kept in touch with me daily. If you think you'd feel up to it..."

"I'll talk with him tomorrow." Harry said.

"Are you sure, Harry? I'm sure I can relate what has happened if you do not feel up to it."

"Thanks, but... I can't run from this. Not if I want to help myself get past it." Harry said. "Just... call down when they're here and I'll Floo up, I guess."

"As you wish."

"Sir? Am I in any trouble for what I did to Moody?"

"I can deal with Cornelius on my own." Said Dumbledore. "I consider your actions justified under the circumstances. A bit harsh, but understandable. I should not have had him lead you off on his own. I would like to also apologize for the force at which I threw you away from him. I admit to doing the first thing that came to mind."

Harry chuckled. "Don't worry about it, sir. I'm glad you did it. I don't want to think about what had happened if the Eximo had connected..."

"Indeed. Well, Harry, I will leave you and your friends be. We can talk more on the subject at any time you wish." Said Dumbledore, moving towards the door.

"Alright." Said Harry. "Thanks for bringing the Powder by."

Dumbledore turned to smile at him before slipping out of the room quietly. A moment later, the group heard the fire flare up for a few seconds.

"I may need that sleep after all." Harry groaned, slumping down in his chair.

"Want us to bugger off?" Asked Fred.

"You lot should go and get some sleep." Harry said. "I'm fine, so you don't have to worry anymore."

"I doubt you're 'fine,' Harry." Said Hermione.

"Yeah, well... I'm fine where it counts. It'll be awhile before I can wrap my brain around what I went through." Harry admitted.

"Meaning we shouldn't worry if you get a bit snarky at times?" Asked George, grinning.

"Yeah." Said Harry, returning the grin. "Now get out of here, you lot. Go to bed!"

"Aye aye, sir!" Exclaimed the twins, offering Harry a dual salute as they stood up.

The rest got up as well and the group filtered back into the main room, with Harry grabbing the bag of Floo Powder from the corner of the table as he went. From there, the group left the room one at a time, saying their goodbyes. Pansy merely gave Harry a strange look before she turned and left. Both Ginny and Hermione gave him a tight hug before they headed out. Solieyu and Luna were the last to exit, wanting to make sure that Harry and Tonks would be alright. After confirming they would, Harry shooed the couple out.

"Urg. It's gotta be getting close to dawn." Harry said, stretching.

Tonks wrapped her arms around him from behind. "Probably. You wanna go to bed, or do you wanna try sitting up?"

Placing his hands over Tonks', Harry shrugged. "Dunno. Brain's telling me to follow the advice I gave everyone else. Just worried about the dreams I might have."

"You don't have to worry about nightmares. I won't be going anywhere. If you wake up, I'll be right there as always." Tonks murmured.

"...Thanks, Nymmy. You're right, I can't stay awake forever. Gotta sleep sometime. If it gets too bad, I can ask Madam Pomfrey for a bit of Dreamless Sleep or something." Harry said.

Harry let himself get tugged into the bedroom, yawning as he went. After the two changed and climbed into bed, Tonks curled up next to Harry and kissed him on the cheek. "It's good to have you back. It felt weird sleeping alone."

Harry closed his eyes, smiling faintly. "Sorry, Nymmy. I wish I could promise that it'll never happen again. But I have a feeling my yearly trend of being knocked out for lengthy periods of time won't be ending anytime soon."

"So long as you come back to me eventually..." Tonks whispered.

"I won't leave you. Ever. I promise." Harry said.

"Promises can be broken." Tonks said.

"I won't break this one." Harry murmured, wrapping his arms around Tonks. "And if I can keep from it, I *won't* be knocked out anymore. The merged voice of my core said I would be stronger now that they're together. I'm going to need to train next year. I'll get stronger so I won't be useless in a fight like I was a week ago. I'll find a way to beat him."

Tonks nestled her nose against his neck, her right hand clutching at his shoulder tightly. "You'd better beat him. I dunno what I'd do if something happened to you..."

"You'll never have to find out." Harry whispered, kissing the top of the girl's head. "I'll win. I seem to have an uncanny lucky streak when it really counts."

Tonks just nodded slightly, pressing against Harry a bit more. "Let's get some sleep."

Smiling, Harry murmured, "I'm not going anywhere, Nymmy. You can relax a little."

"Can't."

"You sure *you* want to sleep?" Asked Harry.

"M'sure. Just making sure you don't vanish on me."

"With any luck, I'll never vanish on anyone again. I'm going to be paranoid about everything I touch for awhile, though." Harry said, sighing.

"Gonna be running magical aura checks on stuff?" Asked Tonks, her voice sounding a bit less upset.

"Knowing my luck, someone will curse the tub and I'll wind up naked and soapy in the middle of London." Harry muttered.

"I'd pay good money to see the photographs of that." Tonks said, stifling a giggle.

"Yeah, I bet you would." Harry said, giving her the evil eye.

"I know what *I'm* dreaming about." Tonks said. "You fleeing from a horde of reporters, wearing a box and ducking down alleyways."

"Oh, sod off, you wench." Harry mumbled.

Tonks just giggled.

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It was eight the next morning when Dumbledore fire-called.

"Harry? The Diggorys are here to see you." Said the headmaster softly.

Harry looked up from the book he was reading. With a nod, he set it down and reached for the bag of Floo Powder that now sat next to Boris' usual napping spot on the fireplace. "I'll be right there." He said, his voice equally quiet.

Tonks was still in bed. He had managed not to have any bad dreams the previous night, but that wasn't to say he slept well. He had been able to slip out of bed without waking the girl up mostly due to the fact that she was exhausted.

Taking a handful of Floo Powder, Harry threw the stuff into the flames and, very clearly, said, "Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

The flames rose and turned green. Harry stepped in, hoping against hope that he wouldn't make a fool out of himself in front of Cedric's parents. He had been awake for three hours, trying to think about what he could possibly say to them. When he spilled out of the headmaster's fireplace, he managed to catch himself from falling flat on his face, though his right knee cracked into the ground with enough force to cause him to let out a sharp hiss.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Asked Dumbledore, helping the Ravenclaw to his feet.

"Been better." Harry murmured. When he stood up, he turned. Cedric's parents had gotten up and were now standing just a few feet in front of him. Harry opened his mouth to try and say something, but found that he had seemed to lose the ability. The grief in their eyes had sucked any prepared dialogue right out of him. Closing his own eyes, Harry settled for lowering his head and whispering, "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Diggory let out a sob then. Harry cringed, but soon found a pair of arms around him, squeezing him with a fierceness he had only experienced a few times in his life. Eyes snapping open, he was shocked to find Mrs. Diggory's arms wrapped firmly around him.

She let go a moment later, bringing up a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. "I-I'm sorry... it's just..."

"Wh... I don't..." Harry began, a look of confusion on his face.

"Albus has told us the story." Said Amos Diggory, who had his hands behind his back. "We won't force you to tell it again. ...Mr. Potter - Harry - I want to thank you."

"Thank me...? But it was--"

"It wasn't. From what Albus has told us, the two of you agreed to pick up the Cup together... That neither of you had any power over what happened." Amos said.

"If I had said I would join him... even though it would have been a lie, maybe I could have saved him, though!" Harry said, finding it hard to breathe suddenly. "If... if I had just bluffed..."

"Lord Voldemort," Began Dumbledore quietly, "has a way of seeing into one's mind. Your lie would have been caught. You did all you could, Harry."

"But..."

Amos put a hand on Harry's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Anyone else would have left our boy's body laying there. Yet you were thoughtful enough even in the chaos to think of him. We don't blame you, Harry. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have a body to bury. God knows what would have happened to him if he had been left behind."

"I'm still sorry." Harry whispered.

"Harry, apart from coming here to thank you, and to tell you that you shouldn't feel guilty for what happened... we want to give you something." Said Amos, stepping back over near his wife. "Albus?"

"Give me something?" Harry repeated, brow creasing.

"First," Began Dumbledore, aiming his wand back at his desk, where a large bag was sitting. "The winnings from the Tournament."

"No." Harry said immediately. He turned back to the Diggorys. "No, I can't. You should take it..."

"Our mind's made up." Said Amos. "You deserve it."

"I don't." Harry muttered.

Dumbledore levitated the bag over, setting it at Harry's feet. Harry stared down at it for a moment, sighing before he looked back up. "There was a 'first' - does that mean there's something else?"

Amos nodded, pulling a wand from inside the jacket he had on. "Harry, the two of us have talked about this ever since the incident. We want you to have Cedric's wand."

Harry's eyes widened. "His... his wand? But why?"

"We know of the things you've done while at this school." Said Amos. "Dumbledore has told us a lot about you this last week. We know you're going to have a heavy fight on your hands with **HIM** back. We wanted to give you our son's wand because while Cedric may be gone, his spirit can live on so long as you carry it and never give up."

"I... are you sure? It's... it's a very personal thing..." Harry said uncertainly.

"We're sure." Said Mrs. Diggory through a sniffle. "And... and if it's at all possible..."

"We want you to use his wand to bring the bastard down." Said Amos, his voice sounding quite strong now. "We know you escaped because you had both wands. And we think that you could do great things if you received the right training. Take his wand, Harry. And may the final blow to him come from it."

Harry took the wand when Amos held it out to him. He stared down at it, unsure of what to say again. When he breathed in again, it caught in his throat. Trying in vain to keep his emotions withheld, he closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"I'll do everything I can." He whispered. "I'll do everything I can..."

Chapter 23 – Twilight Memories

You know, you'd think I'd be used to rumors about me floating around by now. But somehow, it just never happens." Harry grumbled darkly.

The year was steadily drawing to a close. And though a good deal of time had passed, the school talked in whispers about him as though he had personally been Cedric's murderer. He had been angry at first, fighting with anyone he heard speaking of him that way. Eventually, he just learned to ignore the talk. It still got under his skin, but lashing out wasn't going to help anything, especially his already questionable reputation.

Ever since the day the Diggorys had handed over their son's wand, Harry had carried it with him. Using the wand holsters that Tonks had gotten him for Christmas, Harry now carried his own wand in his back-right pocket while keeping Cedric's up his left sleeve. He hadn't had a chance to use them together yet, though he had spent a good deal of time letting his emotions out the day he had received the second wand.

Many people had been brave enough to come up and ask Harry directly what had happened. One of which, Cho Chang, Harry had dreaded seeing. The girl had looked like hell for ages after learning of Cedric's death. Now, with the end of the school year ending, she seemed to finally be moving out of her grief period. Unfortunately, she seemed distinctly interested in talking to Harry more than he was willing to happen. She kept trying to catch him on his own. It was to the point where Harry was honestly thinking of taking Fred and George up on their offer to be his bodyguards until the term ended.

Durmstrang and Beauxbatons had long since left. Viktor Krum, who turned out to have been placed under the Imperius by Moody, had been let go without any charges brought against him. The leader of their school, Igor Karkaroff, had vanished at some point before the Third Task and hadn't been seen since. Krum had taken control of the other Durmstrang students and had promised to try and turn their school around, stating that he never did like the Dark Arts.

Harry had been sad to see Fleur and Gabrielle go. It almost felt as though Harry were saying goodbye to a little sister of his own. It hadn't helped that the younger Delacour had practically toppled him over in a hug when they were about to depart, saying that she wished she could stay at Hogwarts. Fleur, who hadn't suffered any long-term effects from being put in the Cruciatus, had also thanked Harry. Twice he had helped her out that year. The two parted on good terms, which Harry was strangely pleased about.

Boris had been acting strangely. Harry couldn't quite place his finger on what it was, exactly, but he knew the little taipan well enough to know when something wasn't right. He had tried talking to the snake, but Boris had claimed nothing was wrong. Which, of course, meant that something was and he was just being quiet about it.

Presently, Harry, Tonks, and Solieyu were making their way towards the Great Hall. It was less than a week to the Leaving Feast and Harry had decided that holing up in the Pit at all possible times wasn't going to help anyone.

"Another year, another problem." Tonks said, sighing.

"Yeah. Only this time, I wasn't able to solve the puzzle before the term ended." Harry muttered.

"You've beaten yourself up enough, Harry." Said Solieyu. "Try and enjoy the last few days at school."

"Considering what I have to go back to, I may as well." Harry said, blowing his bangs out of his eyes. "It's going to be a nightmare at the Dursleys' this year. I dunno how calm I'll be able to be with their constant badmouthing. More than that, I'm worried about what'll happen in regards to my nightmares."

The nightmares had indeed come. And they seemed keen on not going away. Harry had ended up needing to see Madam Pomfrey about Dreamless Sleep after all. The mediwitch had agreed to give Harry a small vial of the substance, but only on the grounds that Tonks and Solieyu keep an eye on him to ensure that he didn't take it every single night.

"If anything happens, and barring any irritating house elves butting in, we're going to make sure you don't get hurt this summer." Tonks said.

"I don't wanna think about it anymore." Harry said. "I'll face it when it happens. You're right, Leon, I need to at least try and relax. I can't keep beating myself up over what happened."

"That's the spirit!" Said Tonks. "Now hurry it up, lunch is waiting!"

"Yes, O Mighty Pancake Godde--*OUCH!*"

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"Harry?"

"...Parkinson? What's up?"

Pansy had caught Harry staring out a window and daydreaming. "I've got news. About the person I was telling you about."

"Oh?"

"He's going to write you over the summer. I think. It's... it's hard to tell right now." Pansy said, holding her left arm. "Slytherin House is a wreck right now."

"I'd imagine. How are *you* holding up?" Asked Harry, turning towards the girl.

Pansy shrugged. "As well as can be expected, given the circumstances."

"I dunno what the rest of us are going to be upto this summer, but--"

"I can't. There's no way. Not this year. I'm... all of us... we're probably going to have to meet *HIM*." Pansy whispered, a shiver wracking her thin frame.

Harry sighed. "I wish I could prevent it from happening."

Pansy laughed. "You can't be everywhere and solve everything, Harry. I know you think you can singlehandedly save us all again, but..."

"I know I can't. I'm not planning on doing anything alone." Harry said.

"You're going to have to be guarded from here on out." Pansy said. "Next year, Death Eaters will have spies within the school. And not just from my House."

"Yeah. Gonna be a fun time on its own. Can't imagine what else I'll end up having to deal with. I've tried not thinking about it. I've found that thinking about the future is a very depressing thing these days." Harry said, leaning back against the wall by the window.

"Yeah. The future..." Pansy murmured, looking away. "...Look, I just came to tell you my friend will be writing. I should go before someone sees us."

Pansy turned to walk away, but Harry caught her by the shoulder before she could get too far. "Are you sure you'll be okay? Over the summer, I mean. I dunno where, but I'm sure I could get Dumbledore to--"

"No. I have to at least pretend to go along with whatever my parents want me to. So do all the children of Death Eaters. Defying the Dark Lord is inviting death. Don't worry about me. I'll take care of myself. I think my friend will fill you in a bit more when and if it happens. Just... just remember - he's my friend. Don't think of him as just another Slytherin, alright?" Pansy whispered.

Harry sighed again. "Yeah. Yeah, I understand. Just make sure to turn up next year. If any of my friends failed to show, I dunno what I'd do."

"Good luck, Pansy." Harry said.

"You too, Harry." Said Pansy, shrugging Harry's hand away and quickly walking back up the corridor.

Harry tilted his head as he watched the girl walk away. He didn't think he would ever understand the Slytherin girl. He also wondered who Pansy's mystery friend was that was planning to write him that summer.

Shaking his head, Harry turned to gaze back outside, losing himself in a daydream again.

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"Alright, snake." Harry said. "We're going to sit down and we're going to talk until you spill it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Replied Boris lazily.

Harry glared at the taipan before picking him up and taking him to the couch. It was early evening two days before the end of term, and Harry was through dealing with his snake's mood. "I bet you don't. What about getting things out in the open to feel better, huh? You just happen to forget when you told me about Whitechapel?"

"Don't speak his name." Growled the snake.

"Fine. But only if you tell me what the hell you've been in a *mood* about!"

The snake let out a low hiss. *"Very well."*

"Is this about my using the Eximo on Moody?" Asked Harry.

"Partially. Partially that and partially because of how you smell now."

"Smell? Don't you mean taste?"

"That would have sounded strange. But yes. Your scent is different now." Said Boris.

"Doesn't surprise me with how the year's gone so far." Harry said. "So my scent's different. So what?"

"So you are following almost exactly the same path my master followed right now and it disturbs me greatly." Hissed the snake.

"I've told you countless times, you thickheaded snake! I'm *not* going to turn into some bloodlusting madman!"

"Moody." Sniped Boris.

"*MOODY* made the Cup a portkey! *MOODY* put my name in the Goblet! *MOODY* was going to kill *me* if I didn't do something!" Harry yelled. "What was I to do?! I'd just witness effing *Voldemort* resurrect himself! I wasn't in the mood for jelly-legs spells or a *tickling* charm!"

"*If you had connected with the Eximo, there wouldn't have been any of him left to WIPE UP!*" Boris snarled. "*You have NO idea to the extent at which the Invidia Eximo can harm a person!*"

"You think not? I saw what it did to that minotaur. I saw what it did to Moody's arm as I flew through the air! I know *exactly* what it can do!" Harry cried. "You're being paranoid just because you remind me of *WHITECHAPEL*! I don't *have* to keep you around, you know. If all you're going to do is spit and fuss about how I'm so damned much like *him*, then why don't I let you go over the summer?"

"*I didn't say I wanted that.*"

"Well then *ACT* like you want to stay around me!" Harry said, exasperated. "**TRUST** me, damn it!"

"It is hard to trust anyone when one has seen hell."

"Yes. I know that very well."

"*No. You don't. You saw one person die. I ate people.*"

"*Master Whitechapel,*" Began Boris quietly, "*Was a horrible man. The spell I fear you learning about, the one I've adamantly told you I would never speak of... do you know why I hide that information?*"

"Because it's too nasty to describe. Because you don't want that kind of power in my hands. Because you think I'd use it." Harry said, shrugging. "Sure, I know."

"Do you know what happens to a human that has his soul removed?"
Asked Boris.

"I almost got to see it happen." Harry said, voice quiet.

"They are left in a state of walking death. They live, they breath, but they take in very little of the world around them. Their brains cannot function properly without their souls. Master Whitechapel, working off of that idea, created a spell not to remove the soul, but to mutilate it. I saw him perfect it. The laughter that echoed through his laboratory that day still give me nightmares. The victim was left in a state of constant, agonizing pain. Pain that would not go away. The man begged my master to end his pain; to make his suffering go away. Master Whitechapel told the man that if he did as he was commanded, he'd reverse the damage. Of course, there is no counter-curse for something like that. You cannot heal the soul."

"The man did numerous things for my master. Dredging up fresh bodies and the like. But he was never 'fixed.' In the end, he clawed through his own chest in an attempt to get to his soul. He died screaming and covered in his own blood."

Harry stared at the snake as he finished speaking. "...And you were afraid I'd use something like that? ...You must not trust me very much."

"That I would even tell you of what it did should tell you I DO trust you." Said Boris, his voice still quiet. *"The name of the spell... do you want to know it?"*

"Do you trust me enough to give me the knowledge, knowing that something like what happened with Moody might occur again someday?" Asked Harry.

"...I do. Because I want to believe you are different." Sighed the snake. *"I want you to have the knowledge and truly prove that knowledge doesn't taint a person. I want to know that, even though you have the power to ruin a man, you'll never USE it. It is... hard to have such knowledge. It is hard to carry such power."*

Harry closed his eyes. "You can trust me, Boris. I know what I did with Moody. But look at me. I'm *fine* now. I was just..."

"Stressed and furious at your friend's murder." Finished Boris. "Yes. Death of loved ones brings out the worst in people. But it would seem... sometimes it may also bring out the best in them as well. ...*Anima Laniatus*."

"Anima Laniatus? That's its name?"

"That is the incantation. Master Whitechapel never officially named it. The motion to cast is a curved, diagonal slash. Much like the cleaving spell you used on the dragon you fought. The more you slash, the worse the damage caused." Boris explained.

"Thank you. I'll show you that it wasn't a mistake to tell me." Harry said.

"It is hard to change one's ways when one has spent most of his life thinking things can only be black or white. I pray you never have want or need to cast the Laniatus." Boris said, lifting his head to look up at Harry.

"What if it's against Voldemort?" Asked Harry.

*"Do you think the creature has a soul **to** mutilate?"*

"Good point."

"Against Voldemort, you have my blessing to try it. But only against him." Said Boris.

"Dunno if I'll want to experiment with a new spell when facing him down. A wrong move against Voldemort would mean death." Said Harry.

"And the Laniatus might be the key to victory should it come to it." Boris said. The snake was silent for a few minutes. "...*Harry?*"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For pushing me forward. For making me talk."

"I'll loosen you up yet, Boris." Said Harry with a faint smile on his face.
"Now then, you wanna talk about something less evil?"

"Such as?"

"Such as more food for you. We're gonna need to stock up before we leave. I've asked Hagrid to find me some rats and to put them in a box. I hope you don't mind a lack of variety, though."

"Rat are fine." Said Boris.

"Good. I hate rats." Harry said. "The less of them on the planet, the better."

"And if they happen to be feeding ME, better still."

"Agreed!"

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The night before the Leaving Feast found most of Harry's friends sitting around the Pit. Harry had been thinking about the prize money he had received from the Tournament. He didn't need it - he had more than enough in his own vaults to last three lifetimes. It had taken him awhile to decide on what he *did* want to do with the money, though.

Pansy was the only one absent when he asked the group to meet up that evening. Harry didn't expect her to come. She had bigger worries on her mind.

"So what's up, Harry?" Asked George. "We having a going-away party for the year?"

"We could provide the party favors!" Fred added, a feral grin on his face.

"You think I'd let you?" Asked Harry, smirking. "No, no. Nothing that grand, though I think a good dinner after is a nice idea."

"So what *are* we doing here?" Hermione asked.

"Not that we mind. Ron's been driving us all crazy." Ginny said.

"Oh? What's he doing?"

"Dancing around acting like an idiot because the school year's over with. Not a care in the world now that he doesn't have schoolwork." Hermione said, frowning.

"How he didn't get into Hufflepuff continues to confuse and amaze us all." Said Harry.

"Agreed." Said the three Weasleys.

Harry stood and headed for the bedroom. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Tonks grinned as she watched Harry walk off. They had talked the night before about what he would do with the money. She had been all for his plan. The rest of the group, including Luna and Solieyu, were in the dark as much as the others, though.

"When the Diggorys came to see me," Harry said, bringing the bag of money out with him. "They said they wanted me to have the winnings from the Triwizard Tournament. I tried to refuse, but they wouldn't let me. But I have too much money. I don't need anymore. But I got to thinking. The world's going to be a dark and depressing place for awhile, I think. And a lot of people are going to have no reason to smile."

He turned and headed for the twins, holding the bag out when he reached them. "Use it to help start up your shop. The world could use a good laugh."

The twins stared at him. They then looked down at the bag.

"Harry..."

"Are you sure?"

"We couldn't."

"Absolutely couldn't."

"You'll take it and that's final." Said Harry, grinning at their shock. "You two can do more than give Zonko a mere run for his money. I've seen your products first-hand, remember. I know you can be successful. But you'll need enough to get a shop and some supplies to get working on."

"Apparently, Harry is fully aware of our family's financial woes, oh brother of mine." Said Fred.

"A very generous offer indeed." George said, nodding slowly.

"We agree." Said Fred. "On one condition."

"That being?" Asked Harry.

"That you drop by every so often for promotions!" Said the twins in unison.

"Wouldn't hurt to have you endorse certain products, either." George said, rubbing his chin as he thought.

"Maybe we could one-up the Firebolt. Imagine how *that* would sell. With Harry giving it the thumbs up and all, we could sell bundles." Fred said.

"Oh lord. What have I unleashed?" Asked Harry.

"Summer's going to be hilariously awful." Said Ginny, rolling her eyes at her older brothers.

"And you have my deepest apologies." Said Harry. "Alright, you lot. We can discuss how much torture the twins will inflict later. Let's go eat."

"I second the motion for dinner." Tonks chimed in.

"Do you think the house elves know how to make Romanian cloud cakes?" Asked Luna.

"What the heck is a Romanian cloud cake?" Asked Tonks.

"Oh, it's quite lovely." Said Luna, who launched into a description of the food that lasted well into the start of dinner itself.

Unfortunately, the house elves didn't, in fact, know how to make it. Hermione was quite insistant that some of the ingredients used in it didn't even exist. Which lead to the next chunk of dinner being spent listen to Hermione trying to talk sense to the very odd Luna. Hermione gave up in the end, thumping her head on the table. Luna just grinned at the girl.

"She realizes how bizarre she is. Doesn't she?" Asked Boris, who was lazily curled around Harry's neck.

"I do believe she does." Harry hissed back quietly. *"I think she just likes driving Hermione batty."*

"Intriguing."

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After everyone had left for the night, with Fred and George promising to keep the money bag away from their 'ickle little brother,' Harry and Tonks retired to the bedroom.

"They're going to drive poor old Zonko out of business." Harry said as he changed.

Behind him, also changing, Tonks laughed. "He'll never know what hit him."

"I hope they were only kidding about the endorsement thing. The last thing I need is to have my face plastered all over goofy products."

"Aww, I think you'd look cute." Tonks said, buttoning her top up then bouncing over to hug Harry from behind.

"**GAH!** Tonks, your hands are freezing! Get those things off my chest!" Harry squawked, having not had the chance to get his pajama top on yet.

Tonks grinned. "Blame the ice cream! And no, I won't! You're warm!"

"Note to self - have the twins invent something to work in a 'revenge for freezing hands on one's body' sense." Harry said, grabbing at Tonks' hands and prying them loose.

"Aww, c'mon, they aren't *that* cold." Tonks said, pouting cutely.

Harry rolled his eyes. "The hell they weren't. I've felt ice warmer than your hands are!"

"Gonna finish getting dressed?" Asked Tonks with a grin. "Not that I would mind you sleeping shirtless or anything."

Harry blushed, spinning back around and quickly tugging on his pajama top. "Oh, hush."

"It's true! C'mon, it wouldn't be that bad, would it?" Asked Tonks.

"Ask again when your hands aren't cold." Harry said.

"Oh, you're no fun at all." Tonks said, sticking out her tongue as she turned to hop into bed.

"You know," Harry said as he walked over, "It'll be tough sleeping in our usual beds back home."

"Yeah. In addition to having to sleep alone all summer, I don't think either of us have a bed as comfy as this."

Harry stretched out, crossing his arms behind his head. "Our last night here for the year."

Tonks mimicked him, staring at the top of the four-poster as well. "Yeah. Don't worry, though. Me an' mum'll stop by until we can get you outta there."

"Think your mother would mind us 'accidentally' falling asleep together?" Asked Harry.

"It would take some doing. We'd have to fake studying or something. Maybe fall asleep sitting up." Tonks said.

"Our necks would never forgive us." Harry said. "...But it would be worth it."

Tonks grinned. "It might not be that big a deal. I don't think I'd be able to hide my ring from her."

"Oh yeah." Harry said, blinking. "What're you gonna tell her, anyway?"

"The truth. That you got me a ridiculously expensive and absolutely beautiful ring as a late Christmas present and I knew exactly what I was doing when I chose the finger to wear it on." Stated Tonks.

"Not afraid she might get mad at us for, y'know, committing to one another at our age?"

"I don't think she has any say in the matter." Said Tonks. "But she likes you alot, so you don't have to worry so much. Once the initial shock wears off, she'll be fine."

Harry chuckled. "Try and hide it 'til after I've scampered off, then."

"Awww, but she'd stare at the ring, then up at me, then over to *you*, then back at the ring again! Multiple times!" Tonks giggled. "Don't you wanna hang around for that?"

"I think it'd be funnier if it was just you. She'd look like she was rocking out." Harry said, dryly.

Tonks snorted. "My mum the headbanger. Thanks, I'll be snickering too much to sleep now."

"Terribly sorry." Harry said, trying not to grin too much.

"You're absolutely horrible, Harry Potter." Said Tonks, sitting up enough so she could lean over and kiss him.

"And yet you love me." Murmured Harry after Tonks pulled herself away.

"And yet I love you." Tonks said, nodding.

"Let's get some rest, shall we? Enjoy our last night in our big, comfy bed." Said Harry.

"The Pit's gonna need a good dusting when we get back." Tonks pointed out.

"Already taken care of." Harry said. "Dobby's gonna take care of things for us while we're gone. I trust him."

"Funny how things work out, huh?"

"Yup."

Yawning, Tonks rolled onto her side. "M'gonna need an extra pillow to sleep with when I get home."

"A replacement, huh?"

"Not gonna be as good as the real thing."

"Naturally!" Harry said.

Tonks looked up at him, caught the pompous look on his face, and started giggling again. "The Boy Who Lived to Be a Pillow."

"Oh god, don't say that around Fred and George! They'd market a line of body pillows with *me* on them!" Harry said, a look of horror spreading over his face.

Tonks cracked up even harder.

"Ohhh, what have I done?" Harry groaned.

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Chapter 24 – Resolve

"And so, another year at Hogwarts has come to an end." Said Harry.

"Indeed it has." Said Solieyu. "It has been... interesting, to say the least."

"Yeah. A psychotic old spy had it in for me, I had to deal with a waking nightmares, and you and Luna..."

"I'll thank you to excuse Luna and I from your list." Solieyu said, fixing Harry with a look.

"Who's skirting around the issue now?" Asked Harry.

"Quiet, you."

Harry laughed.

The three were on their way to the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast. Tonks was happily bouncing at the thought, as the Leaving Feast tended to have more interesting dishes than one would normally find. Which baffled Harry, since they could order whatever they wanted, but he let the girl have her bounciness. She had thankfully calmed down since they had left the Pit. She was still holding his hand, but she was moving around a *lot* less.

When they opened the doors, the first thing they noticed were the black banners hung from the ceiling in place of the usual House banners.

"He warned me about it. Doesn't make it any easier to look at." Harry said.

Tonks squeezed his hand softly. "Try not to worry about it."

"I am. It just brings back bad memories." Said Harry. "I'll be okay. Quieter than normal, maybe, but okay."

Dumbledore stood up then, giving a speech that made Harry feel a little better. They toasted Cedric's memory and the headmaster made

him out to be incredibly brave. Which, Harry thought, was a good description of him. He hadn't quaked where he was tied up, whimpering about seeing the Dark Lord return. He had been braver than most would in the situation.

Harry put a hand on his left arm, patting at Cedric's wand which was holstered in its usual spot. It almost felt like the wand was giving off a sort of warmth at all the attention its former holder was receiving.

When the meal was over, the students started filtering away to collect their things. It would be an hour before the Express left. Harry's group already had their trunks, shrunk down and pocketed, so they spent their time loitering around the Entrance Hall, talking with their friends as they arrived.

The boarding of the Hogwarts Express was mostly uneventful as it usually was. Hagrid, as always, waved to them as they got on. Harry waved back this time and had thanked him for rounding up rats for Boris to feed on over the summer. Harry had forgiven the half-giant for bringing him to Number Four all those years ago. He was a simple man and followed Dumbledore's orders to the letter, and Harry didn't feel he should have a grudge against the man in light of recent events.

Harry, Tonks, Solieyu, and Luna found an empty compartment towards the back of the train that they happily set up shop in. Harry sat near the window with Tonks laying out as best she could, her head on his leg. She had to bend her legs to fit, but she seemed happy enough. Before long, and much to Harry's amusement, Luna had decided to copy Tonks. Harry grinned at Solieyu, who was blushing. Solieyu gave him a withering look in return.

Once the train got going, the rest of Harry's group popped in for brief visits. Pansy merely tapped on the window to their compartment as she passed by.

A few hours into the trip, and once both girls had fallen asleep, Solieyu looked up at Harry. "Dumbledore was talking to me the other day. Mother and I aren't going to be staying at home this summer."

"Oh?"

"The vampires were one of the first groups Voldemort got to come to his side in the last war. The headmaster feels it best that we go into hiding. I'm not sure where he's got planned for us to be, but he insisted that it was safe." Solieyu said, lightly brushing strands of hair out of Luna's face.

"Wonder if he's going to start the Order of the Phoenix up again." Harry said.

"Order of the Phoenix?"

"Moody mentioned in." Harry said, glancing outside. "Something about a group Dumbledore started to fight Voldemort's force in the last war."

"Perhaps..." Solieyu said, nodding. "In any case, I'll try and write from wherever we get put up."

"If Dumbledore's finding it, owls might not be able to go in and out. But I'm sure he'll have some way for you to get letters to us." Harry said.

"Have you spoken to Parkinson lately?" Asked Solieyu.

"I have. The friend she's mentioned is apparently going to be writing me over the summer. Wouldn't say who it was. I have a few guesses, though. She doesn't hang around that many people." Harry said.

"I feel bad for the Slytherins. I honestly do. I wonder how many won't be returning next year."

"I've tried not to think about it. I'm going to be messed up if Pansy doesn't return, though. She may be confusing, but she's still my friend." Harry said. "...Damn it, I wish there had been a way to kill Voldemort the night he was brought back. So many people are going to suffer..."

"You can't win them all, Harry. Be glad you escaped." Solieyu said.

"I am. It's just frustrating. Every year I've been at Hogwarts, it's been like I've had to deal with these huge problems on my own. I'm not used to something being out of my hands like this." Harry said.

"Ahh, so that's it."

"Yeah. I hope Moony and Sirius are okay out there..." Harry sighed.

"I'm sure they are." Solieyu said. "They're smart."

"Won't stop me from worrying. I'm going to need to try and keep busy this summer. If I don't, I'll worry myself sick." Harry scowled. "Wish I had brought some books from the Pit with me now."

The door to their compartment was suddenly slid open. Harry blew out an annoyed sigh when he saw who was standing there.

"Hello, Malfoy." Harry said. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"You'll lose." Said Malfoy simply.

"What?"

"Against the Dark Lord. You'll lose."

"Don't be so sure. I'm not going to sit back and let him do what he wants, Malfoy." Harry said, a fire lighting in his eyes. "I'll beat him. For good this time."

"You? Beat *him*? Doubtful. People don't defy the Dark Lord." Stated Malfoy.

"Yes, that's right. Those that do have a bad tendency of being killed." Harry said, his voice rough. "But I'd rather die than wind up as a bootlicking toady like your father is. He was there that night, you know. He disarmed me. Of course, he did it from clean across the graveyard like the coward he is rather than face me directly. He may as well have been kissing Voldemort's feet, the way he acted."

"You take that back, Potter." Said Malfoy, his voice dangerously low. "My father would never be a bootlicking toady and neither will I!"

"I don't need to take it back." Harry said, shaking his head. "You'll see for yourself soon enough, I reckon."

"Yes. I will." Said Malfoy.

"Then go away and think about what your precious Death Eater family will be like. If you truly believe Voldemort treats his followers as equals, you're mad. They're nothing but expendable pawns to him." Harry said.

Malfoy glared at Harry, but turned and left anyway, leaving the compartment door wide open.

"That was fun. Can't imagine having to deal with that idiot *and* his father coming at me in white masks." Harry said, leaning his head back. "Little parasite gave me a headache."

"So nap." Solieyu said, drawing his wand and using it to shut the door. "We've got a ways to go yet."

"Good idea. Hopefully I'll be able to avoid nightmares. Usually I can for naps." Harry muttered, letting his eyes slip shut.

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It was dark when Harry woke up next. Tonks and Luna were awake now, talking quietly with Solieyu, who looked like he *wanted* to be napping.

"Feeling sleepy?" Asked Harry as he wiped at his eyes.

"Sleepy and in need of a 'fix,' if you catch my drift." Solieyu mumbled.

Luna stared at him a moment before lighting shoving at his arm. Reaching into her robes, she pulled out a handful of still-wrapped Blood Pops. Solieyu stared at them for a moment, a mental fight raging. His weaker side gave in and he took one from the blonde, unwrapping it and popping it into his mouth. A relieved sigh filled the air a few moments later. Luna just smiled, tucking the remaining lollipops back into her robes.

"I hate blood." Muttered Solieyu around the Blood Pop. "But it does relax me."

"You think it'd keep your cravings at bay?" Asked Tonks.

"Doubt it. Just good to get that itchy feeling in my stomach to go away for awhile." Solieyu said. "It'll help until I can get home."

"Speaking of," Tonks said, nodding out the window. "There's the station."

And so it was. The train slowly pulled into King's Cross moments later, grinding to a halt. The four got up and made their way from the compartment. Amidst the sea of other students, they made their way through the train and out the doors.

Andromeda was waiting for the group near the barrier.

"Mum!" Tonks called, running up and hugging her mother.

"Hello, dear." Whispered Andromeda, hugging her daughter in return and smiling as the rest of the group walked over. "And you three."

"Have you heard?" Asked Harry.

"Yes. Albus told me." Andromeda said. "We can talk on the way home. Where are your trunks?"

"Pockets." Tonks said, shrugging.

"Ah. Well, I'll get those later, too."

"Luna, do you need any help?" Asked Solieyu.

"No, my father will be along soon. He can unshrink mine." Replied the blonde.

"Right. Well, you guys, I should go and catch the Bus." Said the vampire. "I've got a bit more traveling to do before I can relax."

"Take care of yourself, Leon." Said Harry.

"You too." Solieyu said. He turned to Luna and started to say something, but the blonde was quicker, wrapping her arms around Solieyu and whispering something to him. He just smiled and murmured, "I'll try."

With that, Solieyu waved and passed through the barrier back to the Muggle side of the station.

"You sure you'll be alright on your own, Luna?" Asked Tonks.

"I'll be okay." Luna said. "Father should be arriving any time now."

"Alright then. If you're sure." Tonks said. "Well, let's get going, mum!"

"As you wish. Coming, Harry?" Asked Andromeda.

"Yup. See you later, Luna! Take care!"

"You too, Harry, Tonks."

Harry's group slipped through the barrier in a line, Luna waving at them as they vanished from sight. A few minutes later, her father popped through, looking tired. She just grinned at him and ran up to give the man a hug.

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"It's going to be tough." Andromeda stated as they pulled into the driveway of Number Nine. "I'm just glad you're both alright."

"So am I." Tonks said, moving one of her hands over one of Harry's.

"So what's the plan this year?" Asked Harry.

"We plan to stop by regularly until you can come and stay with us." Andromeda said. "With any luck, you should only be there a week or two."

"I can handle that. After the year I've had, I don't think the Dursleys are going to pose much of a threat." Harry said, opening the door and stepping out.

Tonks did the same and walked around the car to hug him. "You just make sure those idiots don't try anything. Wards be damned, you get your butt over here if you even *think* they might try something."

Harry wrapped his arms around the girl, nodding. "I will. Try not to worry too much, okay? I survived Voldemort. I can survive a pair of bloated hippos with body odor problems."

Giggling quietly, Tonks let go of him and took a step back. "Even so, I want you to be careful."

"I will. Promise." Harry said, pulling his trunk from his pocket and looking over at Andromeda. When the older Tonks woman had managed to fix his trunk up (complete with wheels for easy travelling), Harry gave Tonks another look.

"...Nymmy, I..."

"Yeah. I know." Said Tonks, walking back up to kiss Harry softly. "Me too."

"See you in a day or two, then." Harry murmured, smiling at the two before turning and heading off up the road.

"We always watch him walk away and it never gets any easier." Tonks whispered, hugging herself.

"You'll see him again soon, sweetie." Said Andromeda. "More importantly, I think you have some explaining to."

"Uh-oh. You noticed the ring?" Asked Tonks.

"No, but I have now." Said Andromeda. "I was referring to the kiss. What's the deal with the ring?"

"...I think we need to go inside for this." Tonks said, rubbing at one of her arms. "You may need to sit down."

"Oh lord."

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Author's Notes: Thank Y'gononac, Goblet is finished!

As unexpected, this is a shorter, epilogue-y type final chapter, like Chamber had. I want to thank you guys for continuing to read and review. And for putting up with my stupid ass for taking a few MONTHS between updates at one point. Thanks for sticking with the story.

It helped to know that people still wanted to read it. Thanks also for putting up with my laziness in fixing Philosopher's Stone's messed-up formatting. I can't recall if I've mentioned it - surely I have - but just in case: It's fixed and you can read it without having to deal with giant, formless blobs of text.

Um... I think I'll take a week off to rest between books. Get away for a little bit before starting in on Order. I actually have a good chunk of one of the early-ish chapters finished. I just couldn't resist. Here's a little hint - Harry and Tonks will continue to sleep with one another at Grimmauld Place. And you know how Mrs. Weasley likes to wake people up. Mwahahahahaha.

Take care of yourselves, kids, and I'll see you in Book 5: The Order of the Phoenix Reassembled! It will be the last book in the series where I'm sort of following the canon, as Half-Blood Prince was mostly an atrocity and I can't imagine Deathly Hallows being any better. After hearing its title, I'm glad I decided to truly AU up the last two books. For now, I'm-a go get some rest. I've written the last few chapters of Goblet in the same night. Seeya later!